

Son of Shadows

Research Thesis

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation
with research distinction in English in the undergraduate
colleges of The Ohio State University

by

Moriah Maresh

The Ohio State University
May 2016

Project Advisor: Professor Manuel Martinez, Department of English

The Red Lord

Anxiety welled within Afieus. It was not the sort of anxiety that merely made one's brow sweat or hands tremble, only to fade away after a night's rest. This kind was all encompassing. It threatened to drown a man in his own thoughts. It had started in his head, a swirling sort of feeling as if he'd stood up too fast. Then his brow began to sweat as though in hope that each wet bead would drain the anxiety from his mind. But rather than providing release, the sweat added to his torture. Fresh beads seeped through the pores on his arms and chest, making his robe stick to his flesh like a layer of dead skin. He had tried to find solace while lying with his woman earlier that night, but even the intoxicating aroma of her breath and softness of her breasts had not eased his mind. So the Red Lord now paced the sprawling floors of his throne room alone.

The steel soles of his leather boots echoed against the stone walls of the chamber. The room, nearly seventy yards in length and forty yards wide, was cloaked in the shadows cast from a steel chandelier hanging from the ceiling. Huge windows covered by thick crimson drapes lined one wall and looked out over part of the city and distant mountains. On the wall behind Afieus' throne, there was a door to a small balcony. The throne sat atop a black marble platform in the center. The chair was made of oak and every inch of it save the seat, which was covered in a bright red cushion, was engraved with images of nude men and women.

Afieus strode to a long table standing behind the marble platform and ran his finger across its dusty surface. A detailed map of the land of Pevnost stretched across the tabletop and was dotted in the small sigils illustrating the placements of enemy troops. Five horseheads covered the western side. Six lions loomed to the west and three to the east. Three bees were

stationed to the north and five to the west. Eight dolphins were stationed by the Green Sea to the south, and four crows were perched in the west. Then there were the serpents, the sigil of Ember, which had five outposts in the north, five in the south, six to the east, and three to the west.

Afieus picked up one of his serpents stationed to the East. For two years, he had neither laid a finger upon the table nor withdrawn troops from their outposts. He blew dust from the small marble serpent in his hand and looked at the two ruby eyes of the snake. They shimmered in the lantern light, and Afieus felt as though they could pierce through his soul. As he started to place the serpent back on the map, the snake turned its head to face him and hissed, “You abandoned us because of *him*!”

The lord threw the serpent across the room. It crashed into a wall and shattered. “I did not abandon you,” he directed at the snake, now in pieces yet its ruby eyes still stared at him. “He forced me from you. It’s because of the boy that you were left to rot. It’s because of him that Ember is crumbling.”

He turned from the table, the reminder of his past ambitions, and climbed the several steps of the platform to his throne. Heavy with exhaustion, he sank into the soft cushion. As his fingers tapped on the armrest, he noticed his nails. Normally perfectly manicured, they were now yellowing and overgrown. They were yellow because of the boy. They were long because of the boy. Everything was because of the boy.

He could not stay seated. He had to move, had to do something before the anxiety drowned him. He fled to the balcony and overlooked the city, his city, which he had inherited forty years before, after his father’s untimely death at the age of forty-five.

His father had been in good health when he and his wife were found in their bedchamber,

their throats cut. Afieus' mother had been tucked under the covers as though in sleep, while his father had been found disemboweled and left in a bloody heap on the floor. Eighteen-year-old Afieus claimed he saw his father's cupbearer enter the room the night of the attack but had thought nothing of it. The cupbearer, a boy of fourteen, admitted that he brought the lord his nightly cup of wine but denied any involvement in the assassination. He was hung two days later with the newly deemed Lord Afieus pulling the lever of the gallows.

Afieus looked upon his city, sleeping restlessly beneath a blanket of stars. He closed his eyes and scanned the landscape in his memory, again thinking of where the boy could have gone.

The Wayless Mountains, their peaks so massive that even Ember appeared miniscule, stood a four-day's journey to the east. *The boy wouldn't go there. Even he knows of all the climbers who have frozen to death.* The thought brought a smile to Afieus' rugged face: Elam dead, frozen to death! He smirked at the idea of Elam suffering in the barren wasteland of ice, stumbling, shivering, choking on his own breath, as the cold slowly devoured his young frame. In a matter of hours, the boy would be dead. And how exhilarating those hours would be for Afieus! The lord breathed a heavy sigh. "No. When that boy dies, I must be the one to see it is carried out. I must see to it."

His mind wandered to what lie north of his home in the Towers, the Valley of Nights. A barren wasteland stretching hundreds of miles, the valley greatly hindered northern trade yet provided protection for the city. Half of the lord's troops had perished from disease, malnourishment, or dehydration as they attempted to navigate the valley, so the boy would have never survived there. And Afieus knew Elam was alive.

To the south, there lay nothing but trade roads, valleys, and the Green Sea, which was

hundreds of miles away. As with the Valley of Nights, Afieus dismissed this possibility. The boy was too cowardly to venture those roads alone. As much as the boy's cowardice disgusted Afieus, it was useful when predicting his movements. Elam would not have gone far from the city.

The only remaining place was to the west: the Forest of Refuge. The tree line of the forest was separated from the outskirts of Ember by a mile-wide field, a trade road, and the Endless River, which ran from the southern sea toward the valley. Strong ravenswood trees filled the forest and rose above Ember's tallest rooftops, casting great shadows across the west wing of the city. Nearly a century past, when Ember was a small trade post and war raged, people sought safety amid the trees. It was then that men discovered the wonders of the wood: fairies and water nymphs, ponds filled with lily pads as big as wagon wheels, flowers that blossomed only at night and glowed in the moonlight like stars. The forest was the perfect place for Elam. Afieus imagined Elam with the fairies; the boy had always adored those miniature humanoids and had often begged to have one as a pet.

With a rush of excitement and momentarily freed from most anxiety, Afieus sent one of the guards to fetch Darien. He returned to his throne, withdrew his sword from the sheath at his waist, and laid it across his lap. His fingers stroked the cool steel, ran up and down the sharp edges, until he drew blood. He watched his blood ooze from the cut and drip onto the blade. The quiet *drip-drip* echoed in the room. Several minutes later, the guard returned with Darien.

Darien was a man of thirty-five, of average height, no taller than six feet, and built with tan, swelling muscle. His black hair stuck out in all directions, and his eyes, which were as dark as his hair, were heavy from lack of sleep. A scar streaked across the left side of his face from his eye to his lips.

Darien knelt before his lord, his head low, then rose to his feet. “It’s the middle of the night! What the hell do you want me for now?”

Afieus gave a small chuckle but said nothing.

“Well?”

“I believe I know where my little boy is, Darien. I want you to take the Shadows to the forest. He is there. I feel it.”

Darien gave no response.

“Darien!”

“Forgive me, my lord,” Darien said, shifting his weight from one foot to the other and absentmindedly making his hands into fists, “but we have already searched—” Darien silenced himself. There were many instances in which he could dispute with Afieus without fear of reprimand, but the subject of the boy was a different matter entirely. His gaze fell to the floor. It was time to obey. “Forgive me. I mean only to—”

“Enough with formalities.”

“Of course. Which Shadows shall I bring?”

“Any you choose as long as you don’t disappoint me. Come back with the boy.”

The demand made Darien flinch. *Come back with the boy.* That had been Afieus’ command for the past two years, and, for the past two years, Darien had not succeeded.

“Yes, my lord.” Darien gave a bow then turned to go.

“Darien.”

The Shadow stopped.

“When you *do* return with Elam, he’d better be alive. Neither you nor I would wish to suffer from the consequences otherwise.”

Darien did not turn back, but his fists tightened. “You will have the boy tonight.”

Afieus watched as his Shadow left the room. The beads of sweat had ceased flowing and now lingered in silent anticipation. His head still spun, but it was now due to excitement. This night would be the night. It all would be over, and he could once again find rest. Elam would be his.

Shadows

Darien walked down the corridor to the Shadow's chambers, knowing all too well the hostile reaction he would receive once he announced they were to leave the comfort of their beds and women to go hunt for the boy.

He turned another corner, descended a flight of stone steps, and continued on a ways in the dim light until he entered a hallway lined with heavy wooden doors and torches. Without hesitation, he set about rapping on doors. Irritated voices soon flooded the hall. Darien swung open the door of one of the rooms and shone his torchlight inside.

A man in a back corner sat up with a hand over his eyes and pushed aside the woman sharing his bed. "Darien? Is that you? What the hell are you doing?"

Darien laughed.

"Shut up and leave me be. I'm tired," the man retorted.

Darien entered the dormitory. "I don't give a damn if you're tired. Afieus' orders. Get off your ass and get ready. We're going to the forest." He addressed the woman, "Go."

"Wait a minute!" the man hollered as the woman scurried from the room without looking back.

Another man chuckled. "Can you two go a day without quarrelling? You're like a married couple!"

"Which one is the woman?" joked another.

A voice from the back of the room boomed, "Shut up, the both of you! Darien has something to say." A hint of sarcasm was obvious in his tone, but Darien ignored it as he had learned to do with most of Dmitrei's remarks.

The men quit their laughing but smiles lingered. “What is it, Darien?”

“We’re going to the forest. Afieus believes that Elam is there, and I trust his judgment.”

“We’ve been there before! There’s nothing! Just pesky fairies and squirrels and—”

“I know that we have gutted the forest, but that doesn’t mean that the boy isn’t there.”

The comment made Darien pause. “The *boy*. Why haven’t we found him yet?” His voice rose, and his cheeks flushed in the torchlight. “A *boy*! It has been two years, and we haven’t found this one boy! Why?”

The men exchanged glances but no one spoke.

“No one knows? Well, I’ll tell you why. We’ve never found Elam because *you* men treat him like he is but a child, like this is a *game*. I will not return empty-handed this time.”

The men looked at one another in silence. Finally, one asked, “What do have I to gain by getting him? He’s nothing to me.” A stir broke out among the rest of the men as they agreed.

“I’ll tell you what you’ll *lose* if you don’t obey Afieus’ orders, swine,” Darien growled.

“What’d you call me?” the man leapt to his feet. “You think you can intimidate me? You’re not my master!”

“But Afieus *is* your master, and he’ll have your tongue cut out if you don’t show some respect.”

All heads turned to a man sitting quietly on his cot. The mute opened his mouth, revealing teeth and a small stub that was once a tongue, and held up his middle finger.

“You deserved to have it ripped out,” Darien replied. He licked his lips. “You owe Afieus your necks, and you best be loyal to him or he’ll throw your flayed corpses on the streets where you came from.”

Dmitrei rose from his cot and strode to Darien's side. Standing nearly a foot taller than Darien and twice as brawny, his presence was that of a giant. "I'm going to get the boy. If you men don't possess Darien's *unfaltering loyalty*, that's your business. I realize it is the wee hours of the morning, but I'd like to see Elam's face again. Was life not simpler before he appeared?" He twirled a massive dagger between his fingers.

"He's nearly driven Afieus to madness," growled one man. "I've seen him pacing, mumbling under his breath."

"When was the last time we raided a village? Sacked a port?"

"That boy isn't worth the trouble he's caused! He's got to pay for what he's done!"

"Then let's make him pay."

"He will pay!"

As the men collected their blades, Darien stepped into the hall and leaned against a wall. The sound of scraping steel and iron filled the passage from every room and struck to the very core of his being. There it resounded, swelling within his chest until he wanted to scream.

The Shadows would always obey Afieus' commands, no matter how obscure or inconvenient. Although most would grumble, they acknowledged that Afieus had saved them from the beggar's life. For that, they were in his debt. Above all, they feared the lord's wrath. They feared death. This truth disgusted Darien, who served Afieus whole-heartedly. He would destroy those who served the lord out of selfish fear, were he permitted; yet he knew there was power in numbers.

As the men flooded into the hall, Darien led them through the Towers and toward the forest. His heart raced, and his fingers tingled as they did at the anticipation of using a knife. Tonight, Elam would be his.

Afieus could have the boy after he, Darien, tasted vengeance.

The Boy and the Moon

Elam was dreaming. His body twitched against the bark of the tree. It scratched his skin. Rather than waking him, the pain intensified his nightmare. He knew he was dreaming but could not, no matter how desperately he tried, awaken. All he could do was watch him kill her over and over and over.

Blood-splattered walls slowly encroached, surrounding him on all sides. She lay several feet in front of him, the gray haze of death now tainting her once sparkling eyes. He turned away, but there she was again, lying before him, staring at him. Again he turned, and again her body stayed in his gaze. He heard himself scream, “I’m sorry!” To which the familiar voice of his conscience replied, “Why didn’t you make her go first? Selfish brat! You could’ve saved her. It’s your fault! IT’S YOUR FAULT! LOOK WHAT YOU DID, YOU LITTLE—”

“Stop! Please!” Elam’s eyes shot open, as he nearly fell from the branch where he had been sleeping. Sweat poured down his face. “It’s not my...it’s...it’s...”

He could not finish, for part of him believed that it *was* his fault. He had not wielded the sword, but he had done something far worse; he had done *nothing*.

He tried to pull the frayed material of his shirt over his bare chest, covered in gooseflesh and sweat. It was of little use. The buttons had fallen off months earlier. With tired eyes, he stared at the moon glowing high above the tree branches. She had spoken of it to him on so many occasions, even called him her “little light.”

“The moon is a light in the darkness, Elam, like you are to me,” she told him. “When I feel the darkness surrounding me, I look at you, my little light.”

“But why am I a moon?” he had asked. “Why not a sun?”

His mother smiled at him, and her blue eyes stared lovingly. “You are a moon,” whispered her sweet voice, “because you light up my thoughts when they are dark. You are gentle like the moon. Don’t try to be as powerful as the sun, my child. Many men have tried, and they have burned doing so. Power can do terrible things.”

Yes, power could do terrible things. Power had cursed him with who—what—he was. He felt the coolness of a tear on his cheek but quickly wiped it away with his sleeve. *No. No tears. They make you soft and vulnerable.* He tucked his hair behind his ear as the wind picked up. The icy hands clutched at his exposed chest and froze the sweat soaking his skin.

With skill, he clutched the thick bark and climbed down the tree trunk. He jumped down the last few feet and landed nimbly on his toes. He shivered again. Even on the forest floor, the eastern winds coming from the mountains could chill to the bone. A single wish raced through his mind: *fire*.

“No fire.” Even as he reminded himself that the smoke could give away his hiding place, the piece of flint in his pocket felt heavier than usual. “No. Think. There’s got to be something.” In the moonlight, his eyes scanned the area.

A deep pond lay several yards in front of him. It was there he would play with the water nymphs, delicate and beautiful creatures with silvery skin and long gray hair. He loved splashing with them and seeing who could hold their breath the longest. Of course he would always lose and would give up, lightheaded, after a few minutes. But all that was during the day when the weather was warm and the sun made the leaves of the trees shine green and gold. Now, the water appeared frigid, eerie, and dark like a starless night.

A tree stump and berry bushes lay to one side. To his right, he saw the remnants of an old fallen tree. He stumbled to the trunk and began to rip off the dead bark and branches. He

arranged the wood into a teepee shape and pulled a piece of flint out of his pocket. He held the flint toward the wood and paused. “Don’t do it.” The wind picked up again, as though testing his limits. He looked at the bark in his hands. “It’s a big forest. He won’t find me.”

Forcing any thought of doubt from his mind, he withdrew the flint from his pocket and the knife from his belt. The blade struck the flint. It made a sharp snapping noise. A spark appeared but vanished before it reached the ground. “Light!” Elam struck the flint over and over. “Light!”

The blade struck the flint, his hands slipped, and the knife cut deeply into his finger. He wailed in pain. A deep cut ran from his nail to his knuckle. He threw down the flint and knife and sucked on the wound. The iron taste of blood filled his mouth. Tears formed in his eyes, but he wiped them away. He hated crying. It did him no good.

He rocked himself back and forth, cowering in a fetal position, hoping that the movement would create some heat. The night seemed to devour him with every passing second. Part of him wished it to make him disappear. Through hazy eyes, he gazed up at the sky peeking down on him through the branches. “Ma—” He stopped himself. She wasn’t there. Thinking about her was useless. He spoke to himself in a whisper, “You’re smart so don’t be stupid. You’re brave so don’t be afraid.” He leaned his head on his knees as his mind wandered to the times before the forest.

He had not always needed to run. He hid for many years, but only the last two had been spent running. He hated running. He hated his life before he fled into the trees, but he hated this present life more. This life was lonely. This life presented no beatings, but he was saved from those cruel hands only through solitude. He wondered which life was better: a life of abuse with the occasional touch of love or a life void of each? He did not have much of a choice as to how

he lived. His life had been meddled with, and now he could only wait for Fate to be appeased.

He was drawn from his thoughts as, through the darkness, he caught sight of a red light approaching from the direction of the city. It grew brighter and brighter. Elam grabbed the flint and his knife and ran behind the oak, his heart beating against his breast. Had Darien found him? He held his breath, listened and waited for footsteps or the weight of a hand on his shoulder. Neither came.

After a minute, he peaked his head from behind the trunk, gripping his knife, the wind whipping through his blond hair. The light was now hovering over the pile of bark and twigs.

“Oh, Lune, it’s only you!” Elam smiled at the unexpected visitor and emerged from behind the tree.

The little fairy, which had been curiously looking around, saw him and smiled, her batting wings creating a quiet whisper. A red light shone about her fragile body and glowed brighter when she smiled at him. She was a Ruby Wing: tinier than a human hand and amazingly delicate even for a creature of her size. Her petite figure was dressed in brown and gold leaves, which had been meticulously trimmed and sewn together with grass to form a tunic. Bright red hair fell in waves to her waist, where a thin flower stem served as a sash. Her head was no larger than an acorn, her eyes red like rubies, her hands smaller than Elam’s smallest fingernail. Most beautiful of all, two shimmering red wings, which were nearly as tall as she, fluttered on her back. They emitted a warming red glow that encompassed her.

Lune was Elam’s favorite fairy out of all those that inhabited the forest. The nocturnal Night Lights who were brighter than fireflies, the Blue Bells who came out only during the day, and the Honey Wings who built hives of honey sweeter than that of any bee, were all beautiful, but Elam loved the Ruby Wings. He loved the red glow with which they shone and the clicking

noise they used to speak. It sounded like two crystal glasses being clinked together. He had learned this fairy language during his time in the forest.

Lune fluttered over to Elam and landed in his outstretched palm, tickling like a feather when her wings brushed his skin. She looked at the bleeding finger, then up at his face with a look of worry.

“I’m fine. My knife slipped.”

The fairy flew out of his palm and buzzed around his head, clicking furiously.

Elam laughed. “Alright, alright!” Lune grew angry when he spoke to her in the human tongue. He made a clicking sound, almost identical to that which she had produced, and the little fairy stopped pulling at his hair. She nestled back into his trembling hand and looked up with a concerned expression as he shivered.

He clicked to her, “What? Can I help it if I’m cold?”

Lune flew over to the pile of sticks. She looked at them, at his stained knife and flint, then back at the sticks. Her hands rested on her hips, and she shook her head in vigorous dissatisfaction.

Elam laughed and tucked his hair behind his ear. “Okay then,” he clicked, “you make a fire.”

Lune took a deep breath then exhaled on the bark.

Elam leapt back as a flame twice her size erupted from her mouth and engulfed the wood in a blaze of dazzling red flames. “Lune, you’re getting good at that!”

Lune stepped back to admire her work and gave Elam a look as if to say, “Ha! You couldn’t start a fire even with flint, and look at what I’ve done!”

Elam joined Lune by the fire. No fire could match that of the Ruby Wing fairies, even

that of firedancers. The flames were unlike any other, capable of changing into all the colors ever seen in the world: yellow to orange, green to purple, red to brown, and all the rest. It was the hottest fire to be found and could take many forms. If a story was told well enough, characters from the tale could be seen in the flames.

Elam stared into the fire, feeling his shoulders slump in relaxation. “I remember one time when I was little, only nine,” he began, speaking of a memory, “Ma and I were at the market. I used to play with the other children while she looked at the booths. One time when some of us were playing, I ran into this old hag—”

Lune clicked disapprovingly.

“Fine. An old *woman*,” Elam corrected at Lune’s command, “and she dropped a teapot she was carrying. It really was her fault. Who carries a teapot through the market without wrapping it? Anyway, she got so mad I thought she was going to give herself a heart attack!” He laughed as he recalled the memory.

In the flames, the fiery figure of a boy collided with that of a bent-over old woman. The fire flickered and sputtered as the figure of the woman threw her arms in the air and the boy backed away.

Elam looked at the figures, his eyes growing wide. “That’s right! She had a hunchback! I forgot about that. Anyway, Ma found me soon after that. I guess I’d been too scared to move, but she told me it was all right. It was an accident...” He thought back to his mother’s voice, telling him not to be afraid. Her gentle voice filled his mind. The figures in the flames disappeared as he became lost in his thoughts.

He became so lost that he did not notice Lune tugging at his hair.

The fairy stared at him. He was far away. She gazed upon him with pity and breathed a

small flame onto his bare foot. Elam's eyes flew open. "Ouch! Lune, what—" But Lune put her hands to his lips. She looked around nervously. Elam could feel her hands trembling as she attempted to keep him quiet. She cocked her head toward the berry bushes.

Elam squinted into the darkness. "What? I don't see any... ugh!"

Lune darted away as Elam fell forward, his head missing the flames by mere inches. A large hand covered his mouth. He struggled, reached for his knife, but the figure holding him kicked it into the trees. Elam stared in terror as his blade vanished amid the shrubbery. He fought to escape as he was forced to stand, and yelled under the massive palm.

"You don't know when to give up, do you, boy?"

Elam recognized the voice, felt the chill of Dmitrei's knife on his neck, struggled to remain standing as his knees grew weak.

"It's been a long time, hasn't it, Elam? Darien, get out here," he shouted in the direction of the bushes Lune had pointed to.

Lune. Where was she? Elam's eyes grew wide as the bush began to rustle.

"Perhaps you want to see a few friends from the past, eh, boy?"

Elam held his breath as he was thrown to the ground in front of the bush, all thought of Lune now knocked from his mind. Pain jolted through his lip, and blood filled his mouth for the second time that night. He scrambled to his feet, his eyes searching desperately for his knife. Where was it?

"Elam! It's been a while. Two years, I believe. Have you really been hiding here this whole time?"

Elam stared as Darien emerged from the bush. "Has it really been that long?" he asked once he was able to find his voice. "I don't think two years is enough." Darien was just as Elam

recalled: a bit short, terrifyingly brawny, with a furrowed brow eternally engraved into his expression. The only change, which gave Elam a twinge of satisfaction, was the scar on the left side of his face.

Darien began circling Elam and drew his knife. “You haven’t changed much. Taller, maybe. Afieus has been waiting for you, boy. He’s grown very impatient.”

Elam forced a laugh, or more of a squeak. “I’m sure he is. He must miss me. Won’t he be disappointed when you return empty-handed? Again?”

Darien stopped his circling. “Oh, we won’t be empty-handed.”

“What makes you so certain you won’t come back to the Towers with us, Elam?”

Elam spun around and backed away from Dmitrei.

“You seem pretty confident, boy,” Dmitrei said. “You’ve been away from Ember for too long.”

“Stay away from me,” Elam said as Dmitrei neared him. Quickly, he bent down and snatched a rock by his feet. “Don’t come any closer!”

“What are you going to do with that? Come on, boy!” Dmitrei held out his arms and spread his feet wide. “Here’s your target!”

Elam felt his hand begin to tremble. The rock was suddenly extremely heavy. Sweat poured down his face as more men emerged from the trees. He wanted to scream. His head was dizzy with panic.

Dmitrei snickered, “Look, Darien. He’s shaking!”

“Leave me alone!” Elam hurled the stone at Dmitrei and hit the Shadow squarely on the nose.

Dmitrei stumbled back in shock. He clung to his face, blood oozing between his fingers.

“You son of a bitch!”

“That’s enough playtime, boy.”

Elam doubled over as Darien’s fist collided with his abdomen. For a moment, everything went black. When his eyes opened, he found himself pinned against a tree with Darien’s fingers clenching his neck. “Let...let me go...”

“Or what? You’re all alone, boy.”

“Shut up!”

“Mama’s left you.”

“I said shut up!”

“There’s no one here to save you. Even that knife of yours is gone.”

“Why don’t you let me have it back? Make things fair. Let me give you another scar.”

Darien spat in his face. “You think you’re smart, don’t you, Elam? Lighting that fire was very smart! The smoke led us straight to you! Do you think you’re strong? That you’re capable of beating me? Of beating Afieus? You’re a fool!”

Elam’s feet were off the ground as Darien’s grasp lifted him higher up the trunk. He kicked wildly. His vision blurred. His feeble attempts at breathing only added to his panic. Darien was shouting at him, but he could not comprehend a word. “Don’t... do...this...” His face turned cold. His hands tingled. Only Darien’s fading silhouette was visible.

A Shadow rushed to Darien and tried to release his grip. “Darien, don’t kill him! Remember what will happen if we bring back a dead body?”

Darien continued to stare at Elam, unreserved hatred shimmering in his eyes. The boy had become limp and now barely gasped for breath. The sight was exhilarating.

“Darien!”

Darien released his grip and watched the boy crumple to the ground. “I won’t kill him.” He hauled Elam to his feet. “Use your legs! Time to go home.”

Feeling as though he were in one of his nightmares, Elam stumbled past Lune’s fire, now glowing green and blue. “N-no...I won’t...I won’t go with you...”

Darien stopped marching and forced Elam to look at him. “You be a good boy. You hear me?” He stroked Elam’s hair, wiped sweat from his face, pressed his knife against his cheek. “Because if you aren’t a good boy, don’t be surprised if I—”

“Darien!”

Elam felt Darien’s grip loosen, and he fell. Something cold hit his hand; the outline of a blade appeared on his fingers, and he quickly grabbed the handle of his knife. Staggering to his feet, he looked around to see where it had come from, and he froze once he saw.

All around them the trees were ablaze, flames sputtering and hissing and reaching toward the moon. Elam coughed and, through the smoke, saw Lune, accompanied by nearly two- dozen Ruby Wings, fluttering about Darien and the others. The fairies clicked madly and exhaled balls of fire into the Shadow’s faces.

Through the crackling flames, Darien’s voice rang out, “Get him! GET ELAM!”

Elam dashed into the trees and heard the sound of Shadows following close behind. He leapt over tree stumps and raced through bushes. He ignored the sting of thorns jabbing into his feet. The footsteps grew louder as the men gained on him. He looked back and, as he did so, caught his foot on a protruding root and fell to the forest floor. He cried out in agony as his ankle twisted. Peering through the smoke, he saw the dark figure of one of the men. He squeezed his eyes shut, preparing himself for the pain he knew would come next. *Don’t kill me!*

A thunderous crash sounded before the plea left his lips. Elam's eyes flew open, and he scrambled back as he saw the Shadow, now crushed and burning beneath the trunk of a fallen tree.

Elam did not look back. He ran. He had no idea where he was going. Not until the flames had vanished from sight and he physically could not lift his legs one step further did he let himself collapse in a sweating heap on the ground. He leaned his head against a ravenwood tree, his heart pounding. He listened for the Shadow's voices but heard none.

Afieus knows where I am. The thought hit him hard, and he let out an anguished yell. *Afieus knows... Afieus...* Elam wiped sweat from his face. Darien would come back. Of course he would. Now what was he to do? The Shadows had come close to finding him before, but this time they had touched him. This time Darien had held him and hit him, and Elam had felt it. This had not been a dream. This had been real.

He leaned his head on his knees and focused on breathing, letting his mind wander. The image of Ember flashed through his mind: the winding streets, the many homes and shops, the madness of the marketplace, the endlessness of the city.

He raised his head. It seemed like ages since he had walked those streets, seen the houses, smelled the aromas of the market. "Darien won't know I'm there," he said aloud, trying to persuade himself to return. His heart leapt to his throat.

Elam pulled himself to his feet and tried ignoring the dizziness he felt in his head. He looked in the direction of the city and paused, letting a moment pass. Then he started forward, stepping over roots and making his way toward Ember in the darkness with only the moon to light his path.

Darien's Return

As he stood before his lord, Darien wished the raging fire had swallowed him whole there amid the trees. He should not have returned without the boy.

Afieus sat in his throne room. Torches and candelabras spilled candlelight about the space, but they failed to illuminate more than a few feet. The red glow of the flames cast dancing shadows upon the stone, as though the souls of those whose lives had been taken within those walls were trying to break free.

In the dim light, Darien stared at a crack in the floor by his feet. He said not a word, did not dare look into Afieus' cool, gray eyes. The lord only sat. A sensation of a hundred crawling spiders crept up Darien's spine.

"Where is the boy?" Afieus' voice was strangely calm.

The Shadow didn't answer.

"Is he in the dungeon? What about the cellars? The catacombs? The gallows? Did you hang him, Darien?"

He was mocking. Darien knew that Afieus was aware of his failure. He need not bother responding.

"How is it that I give you a simple task yet you consistently fail? You have destroyed houses, burned crops, all in my name, yet you fail to retrieve a boy. Explain yourself, Darien. Explain how useless you are to me."

Blood rushed to Darien's scarred face. "Useless! Damn it, Afieus, I have burned towns for you! I have wiped out entire cities for your pleasure and power!" The veins in his temples swelled beneath his skin. "You are not the only one lying awake at night wondering where Elam

could be. I have my reasons for wanting him back, and I am not the one cowering behind these walls waiting for him to be brought to me!” Darien stepped back, realizing he had gone too far. He braced himself as Afieus lunged from the throne with his fist raised.

Pain pulsed through Darien’s mouth as he collapsed to the floor. He held a hand to his swelling cheek. He had lost a tooth; there it was, yellow and bloody, on one of the tiles. He swore as he spat blood onto the floor and fought the urge to strike back.

Unmoved, Afieus watched the blood drip from Darien’s lips and knelt to be level with his disciple. He whispered into Darien’s ear, “You know my reasons for not going after him myself, my faithful Shadow.” He stroked Darien’s hair as if trying to comfort him. “And if you dare to question that reasoning again, you will lose much more than a tooth.”

Darien wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and turned to Afieus. Their eyes locked. Yes, he knew the story of Elam and why he must be killed. He had seen the boy’s fate unfold.

A maid passed by the door as Darien again wiped his mouth. The girl, looking no older than fourteen years of age, cautiously entered the room with a towel draped over her arm and eyed Afieus to see if her assistance was required. Afieus held up his hand. She paused in mid-step.

“Let Darien clean his mess,” he told her. “He must accept the consequences that accompany his arrogance.” He stood and looked down on Darien. In the dim light, the deep scar on his Shadow’s face looked like a tear in a white sheet.

The maid glanced at Darien and shuddered. After bowing to Afieus, she hurriedly left the room.

Darien listened to her footsteps fade away. He had recognized the girl. She was the daughter of one of the maids. What was her name? He had forgotten. He focused his attention on the memory of the girl, trying to distance himself from the pain. Afieus grabbed a fistful of his hair and yanked his head up.

“Remember, Darien,” Afieus’ voice filled Darien’s mind even as he tried to remember nothing but the girl, “those who obey me will be rewarded, and the fools who disobey me will be punished. I have faith that you would never defy me. Or would you dare?”

Darien had momentarily forgotten about the blood oozing from the hole in his gum but now nearly choked on it as he gurgled, “My life belongs to you. You know that. Always, I am yours.”

“Clean the floor, then you may go.”

Darien stared at the puddle of blood collecting by his hands and shimmering in the torchlight. The sight would have been grotesquely beautiful if only it were another’s. He waited for Afieus to leave, but the lord did not move. Darien slowly pulled his shirt over his head and used it to mop up the blood. He felt Afieus staring at him as he worked. Once the last drop of blood was soaked up, he rose, bowed to his master, and left the dismal room without looking back.

He walked through the chilly corridors, down a flight of chipped stone steps, and turned a corner to enter a cramped bedroom. Unlike the rest of Afieus’ men, Darien was fortunate to have a private chamber and could come and go as he pleased. This created jealousy among the Shadows but Darien was a feared and respected disciple, thus few men expressed their envy.

The room was sparse. A bed rested against a coarse wall, and the wooden bed frame was covered with carvings of creatures Darien had chiseled during the many nights when he could

not find rest. The frame had the potential of being a nice piece of furniture in its prime but was now no more than an abused slab of wood. A plain trunk with a rusted, broken latch rested at the foot of the bed. By the opposite wall there were a table and chair, and above the table there hung a cracked mirror. In passing, Darien caught sight of his reflection; his back and chest were covered in scars, the mementos of past brawls, punishments, his failures. He swiped the mirror from the wall and hurled it at a corner. Glass shattered.

Defeated, he threw his soaking shirt on the chair and collapsed on his bed. That was not the first time Afieus had struck him, the scars were sure signs of that, but the strike itself was not what bothered him. Pain was temporary. Like the sun, it would come, stay for a while then sink back down again, only to reappear the next chance it got. A never-ending cycle.

Darien closed his eyes and leaned against the wall. He was angry. The pain he could deal with, he actually embraced it since it occupied his mind, but the anger was what he loathed. He was angry with himself. What was worse, he was angry with Afieus. He hated himself, but he did not hate Afieus. No matter how much anger he felt, he could not bring himself to hate him. The lord was his savior. How could he hate his savior?

Feeling too frustrated to stay still he rose from his creaky bed and approached a small window, barely big enough for his head to occupy. He looked out over the city. The sun was creeping over the Wayless Mountains, and Ember's silhouette shadowed the horizon. A never-ending cycle.

Returning to Ember

Elam ran toward the city. He raced through thorns, splashed through puddles, jumped over ditches, all the time fighting the sun that blazed through the trees. He did not dare to stop. He continued running when his shirt caught on a branch, tearing the sleeve. He did not stumble when nettles stung his ankles and sent a searing pain through his legs. He wanted to get away. *Get away from what? They will be in the city, too. Are you going to just throw yourself down at their feet?*

He stopped running. Resting on a tree stump, he wiped the sweat that was stinging his eyes. His shirt was soaked through with sweat and clinging to his skin. He could hardly breathe. The humid air made it nearly impossible to choke in a breath.

Elam held his head in his hands and tried to slow his breathing. His throat felt dry like clay, and he swallowed what little saliva there was in his mouth as though it were water. “They know I’m here,” he whispered, hoping the sound of his own voice would offer some encouragement. He looked around the forest. He was trapped. He had always known of some place he could flee if the circumstances required it, but no longer. The world was closing in around him, and he felt that it was about to crush him. *You always knew that it would.* “Shut up,” he panted, wrestling with his thoughts. It was a fight he had grown accustomed to. “I’ll get to Ember. It’ll be safe there.”

The time had been long since he had walked Ember’s cobblestone streets, seen merchants from the other side of the world, or entered the inns, bars, and taverns. They were all distant in his mind, collages of lost memories, blurred by time.

He pushed himself to rise from the stump. His legs wobbled, but he continued his way toward the city. This time he walked. Thorns and brambles surrounded him and seemed to follow him all the way to Ember.

His stomach turned as the forest's end came into view and he heard the distant sound of bustling wagons and villagers traveling on the road. He paused. Only a few trees now separated him from the world he had fled. *Don't be afraid. Go.*

A ray of sun blinded him as he emerged from the trees, and there, across a rolling green valley, across the Endless River, was the city of Ember. Elam stared as yellow circles floated in front of his eyes from the sun's bright rays. In the distance, the rooftops of shops and residences reached toward the sky. Excitement swelled in his chest, and he hurried through the tall grass.

The green and yellow blades brushed against him as the sun shone down on his pale skin. Everything was so warm. He looked up to see a clear blue sky unobstructed by tree branches. For a few miraculous moments, he truly believed that he was free.

He reached the edge of the valley, caught sight of an old wooden bridge, and crossed the river. As he stepped onto the road and rocks crunched beneath his feet, his excitement turned to anxiety.

"You, boy!"

Elam turned toward the voice, his hand instinctively reaching for his knife. A small cart filled with vegetables had pulled up alongside him. Its driver was a heavyset man in his forties, with a round face, a head of short gray hair, and a scraggly beard. His clothes were tattered and dirty. Elam stepped back as a broad smile spread across the man's countenance.

"Well, boy? Can't you talk?"

Elam nodded, still wary of the jovial stranger. "Of course I can."

The man let out a roaring laugh. “That’s good to hear. Otherwise you would have been an even sorrier sight!”

Elam glanced down at himself. He looked like a beggar. His shirt had a long rip in a sleeve from getting snagged on branches and was nearly falling off his arm. His pants were frayed and too short, and the dirt and grime that had gone unacknowledged for so long was now visible in the sunlight. His feet were calloused and bleeding. He looked up at the driver.

“Where’re you headed?” the man asked.

“The city.”

“Hop up!” The man scooted over and patted the seat next to him. “I’m going there myself. How’s the marketplace sound to you? That’s where I’m headed.”

“Sounds fine.” Elam climbed onto the bench and held onto the side. The man cracked his whip, a sound that startled both Elam and the mule, and the cart lurched forward. Elam looked down at the ground and began to feel queasy.

“What’s the matter, boy?” the man asked. “You’ve never been in a cart before?”

I don’t think so. “Sure I have. Lots of times.”

The man gave him a curious glance. “What’s your story, lad? I’m Gus by the way.” He held out a dirty hand.

Elam looked at it.

“Well come on, now. Be sociable!”

Elam cautiously reached out a hand. He flinched as Gus took it, but relaxed a bit upon realizing that it was only a handshake.

“You’re a jittery one.” Gus pulled back on the reins as the mule started walking off the path. “Sorry, girl! Better keep both hands steady. She’s going blind, the sorry ass.” He turned back to Elam. “Well, what’s your name?”

Elam held his breath. What if this man knew of him? What if Afieus had told people about ‘the boy?’ This man did not appear to have any idea of who he was. “Finn. My name’s Finn.”

“Well, Finn, it’s a pleasure to meet you,” Gus said warmly. “Where’re you from, and what made you look so...uh...well, I’m sorry, son, but so sorry-looking?”

Elam forced a small grin. “It’s alright.” He looked at his lap with a gloomy expression. “I don’t want to burden you.”

“Not at all!”

“Well,” Elam began, “I was traveling with my family, my mother and two sisters. We were going to live with my uncle. He’s a good man. Ever since Papa died, he’s been sending us money every few months.”

“You’re father’s dead?”

Elam nodded. “He died last year. He was a miner. You ever heard of the diamond mines east of the mountains?”

“Of course I have!”

“Part of the mine caved in on itself. Most of the men got out. Papa *had* gotten out, but he went back in to save one of his friends. When he was in there, the mine collapsed.”

“Gods have mercy. ”

“He was a good man. I’m all Mama has left. My sisters can’t do much. They’re only six and seven years old.”

“How old are you, Finn?”

“Seventeen.”

“Are you, now?”

“Yessir. I know I look younger than I ought to.”

“How’d you get separated from your mother and sisters?”

“We were robbed at the base of the mountains.”

“What?”

“Well you’ve heard of the robbers there.”

“No, I haven’t!”

“How have you not? We were traveling through a pass, and five men ambushed us.

Mama and my sisters were able to hide in one of the caves while I fought those men off. Then they took me. That’s why I look like this. They beat me and took my shoes and most of my clothes and left me unconscious. I’ve been wandering ever since, trying to get to my family

Gus let out a long whistle. “You sure are a brave young man.”

“I do my best.”

Gus glanced at him again. “How old did you say you were?”

“Seventeen.”

“What were your sisters’ names?”

“I didn’t say.” He paused. “You don’t believe me?”

“No, no, Finn. Just getting my facts straight. Memory isn’t so good when you get to be my age.”

Elam watched as the cart pulled onto a busy street. The buildings of Ember were just as he remembered, built of stone and brick, side-by-side and separated only by narrow alleyways.

Wagons and carts, just as the one he rode, pulled by horses, oxen, and donkeys, slowly made their way through the crowded streets. The city appeared unchanged. “Are we close to the market?”

“Close.”

Elam looked down the road. He felt overwhelmed by the amount of people passing by and how he, seated atop the cart, was above most of them. “I think I’ll get off here.”

“You sure, Finn? It’s not much further—”

“I’m sure. You’ve been very kind to me.”

“Let me pull over—”

Elam jumped off the cart before Gus could finish the request. As he landed, he tripped into a woman, sending her stumbling backward and almost landing in a wagon filled with stinking fertilizer.

Gus looked back and laughed as he followed the flow of the traffic. “Good luck, Finn! You’ll need it!”

“I’m sorry,” Elam apologized to the old woman.

“Get away from me, mongrel!” the woman swung her large bag at him.

“I’m sorry! Let me help you.”

“You’ll do no such thing!”

Elam leapt back as the woman took another swing at him, and joined the flood of people. For the first time in years, he was among people. There were wealthy people dressed in purple robes with rings decorating every finger, and there were the common people and beggars in tattered and ragged clothes. He had forgotten so many people lived in Ember.

As he followed the crowd toward the market, the warm scents of toasted bread, fresh fruit, sweet maple syrup, decadent cakes, and foreign incense all mixed together to form an intoxicating aroma that enticed the senses. Elam soon felt nauseous from all the blending smells, of which he had so long been deprived.

Three women in flowing dresses stood giggling around a merchant's booth where golden jewelry and rare gem broaches glistened in the sunlight. The merchant, looking very pleased with himself, delicately clasped one of the necklaces around one woman's neck. Elam passed a stand containing bottles of strong perfumes, which cost enough money to feed a small family for at least five months. Another man was selling potatoes and cabbages from his farm. A little girl in a ragged dress clung to the farmer's legs. Elam eyed the food hungrily. His fingers twitched. As soon as the man turned his back, Elam snatched the first thing he could grab, a potato, stuffed it up his sleeve, and bolted down the street just as the man turned back around. Not one pang of guilt haunted his conscience.

He passed bakeries with windows heaped high with pies and cakes. Occasionally there would be a tavern where a man would stumble out the door in a drunken haze. One began a fight with a stranger. Eventually, Elam slipped the potato from his shirtsleeve and began eating it raw. His stomach grumbled. He devoured the starchy food, which only made him crave more.

His view jumped from window to window, eyeing the delicacies each store offered. His mouth watered at the sight of them. He started toward a place that appeared to be an easy target, a bakery crowded with people shuffling in and out. He was very close to the door when something caught his eye and made him stop abruptly: a booth covered in metal cages, each cage containing a Blue Bell fairy. The fairies' hands clung to the bars as they watched people pass by.

Lune. Elam suddenly remembered the little fairy. He hadn't seen her after the fire, and he wondered if she had escaped. She must have. She was smart.

A young couple beside him exchanged laughter with one another, and he eavesdropped on their conversation:

"They're so precious!" the woman squealed. "Isn't that noise they make the cutest thing? I wonder what they're saying!"

The man rolled his eyes. "They aren't saying anything. It's just gibberish. Look at them."

"I want one. What a cute pet it would be!"

"You can't keep a plant alive. You don't need a fairy."

Elam watched the man escort the disappointed lady away from the booth and then looked back at the fairies. He could understand them. "Don't cry," he clicked quietly in the fairy language. "I can help you." The fairies turned their heads toward him in unison. He looked at the merchant. The owner of the booth was blowing fire from his mouth to amuse a group of children and seemed even more enthralled by his own tricks than the wide-eyed little viewers. Elam silently unhitched a cage.

The fairy flew from the enclosure, stretched her wings, and quickly fluttered away into the sunlight. The others watched her disappear, and Elam reached for another cage.

Suddenly, a hand grabbed his shoulder. Elam pulled the knife from his belt and spun to face the stranger.

It was a young man. He stood a few inches taller than Elam and looked about twenty years old. He glanced at the blade, but a warm smile soon spread across his face. "Put it away,

Elam. Don't say you don't remember me." His smile grew, and the sun made his blond hair shine like gold.

"Furey?" Elam quickly returned the knife to his belt.

Furey wrapped Elam in an embrace but soon backed away. His tan brow furrowed as he asked, "What are you doing here?" He stared into Elam's eyes, which were much like his own: blue.

"What do you mean, what am I doing here?" Elam snapped.

Furey shook his head, but a grin still pulled at his lips. "You haven't changed much." He again put a hand on Elam's shoulder. "Come on. You look like you could use something to eat." He looked at the man selling the fairies and saw that he was still playing with fire to amuse his onlookers.

Furey reached toward a cage and released a Blue Bell. He glanced back at the man; he had not noticed the fairy flying away. "Amateur," he snorted. Turning back to Elam, he said, "Come with me."

Elam followed Furey in the direction from which he had come. They passed the cart of manure, the familiar booths, and soon stopped outside a tavern. It was a relatively small building compared to its neighbors yet with the common stone walls and thatched roofing. A weathered sign hung above the door. In looping gold letters it read, "The Travelers' Tavern," and below that in much smaller letters, "May the road be easy and the destination bright." A large mug the size of a cauldron jutted from the sign, upon which several Ruby Wing fairies sat and dangled their red legs over the rim. Sparkling dust fell from their hair and landed on the heads of passersby.

"What's this?" Elam asked.

“The Travelers’ Tavern. After you,” Furey said, as he held open the door.

A cloud of musty air hit Elam in the face as he entered the cramped room. The smell of sweat, alcohol, and roasting meat mixed together in a way that made him hesitate before allowing Furey to close the door behind them. The space became darker as the door shut out the sunlight.

“This is one of my favorite places,” Furey said, encouraging Elam onward.

Elam’s eyes scanned the room as they adjusted to the change of lighting. In a back corner, a group of five musicians played lively music on wooden flutes and string instruments that hung over the shoulder like a sling. Tables and cushioned booths lined the walls, and oil lamps aided the light peeking through the windows. He followed Furey to a booth and sank into the soft cushion. It was difficult to remain sitting up straight.

“How about something to drink?” Furey asked, flagging down the waitress before Elam had the chance to acquiesce or decline. The young woman quickly approached the table. “Greta, get me and my friend here a bottle, will you?”

“I don’t want alcohol,” Elam murmured.

“Right. Then how about a bottle for me and some cider for Devon here?”

Greta nodded and walked away with the order.

“So...” Furey coughed and cleared his throat. “Where have you been?”

“Does it really matter?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“You just disappeared for two years!”

Elam’s eyes widened. “Two years? It was really two years?”

“You don’t know how long you’ve been gone?”

Elam shook his head. “Darien said it’d been that long, but I didn’t believe—”

“Shh.” Furey leaned in and kept his voice low. “When did you see Darien?”

“Last night in the forest. He found me.” Elam shifted in his seat.

“You set that fire, didn’t you?” Furey guessed. “I heard about it this morning. One minute there was smoke and the next it was gone. That was you!”

“No. That was actually—”

“That’s why you came back,” Furey interjected, “because he discovered where you were!”

Elam said nothing.

Furey leaned in closer. “Elam...Devon...Afieus wants you dead. You disappeared for two years. There were signs posted around Ember with descriptions of you—”

“People know what I look like?” Blood rushed to Elam’s face.

“Yeah, but you don’t look like the descriptions anymore. You’ve grown at least half a foot. You’re nearly my height now. Blond hair and blue eyes...there are a lot of people like that. Just look at me! Looking at you is like looking in a mirror.” Furey leaned back in his seat.

“There’s something different about you. I don’t know what it is. Maybe it’s that you smell like horse piss.”

Elam forced a chuckle and looked around for the waitress.

“But really,” Furey continued, “what does Afieus want with you? What did you do? No offense, but you’re...how old are you?”

“Fourteen.”

“Fourteen. So you would have been twelve two years ago...what could you have done being twelve?”

“Nothing. It’s not important.”

“You can tell me. I’m not one to judge—”

“I didn’t do anything!” Elam closed his eyes and drew a breath. He felt blood pulsing through his temples. It made his head hurt. “I didn’t do anything,” he said again, keeping his voice low. “That’s the truth.”

“But—”

“What’s it to you, anyway?” He saw a look of hurt on Furey’s face and took another breath. “Sorry.”

“Never mind. It’s not important, right?”

“Right.”

Finally, Greta came back with a dark brown bottle and a large mug. Furey thanked her.

“So where’s he from?” Greta cocked her head toward Elam and played with her long black hair. Her voice was surprisingly snippy.

“Devon is a cousin of mine,” Furey said.

“From Hexham,” Elam blurted. Then, more audibly, “From Hexham.” He felt himself slump into the cushion again as Greta raised her eyebrows.

“Sure,” Greta said. She turned to Furey. “You know you owe me money. You said you would pay off your tab three weeks ago.”

“I haven’t paid you yet?”

“No.”

“I could’ve sworn I did last week.”

“Just pay the bill, Furey. You’re lucky I like you.” She gave a little grin then spun on her heels and walked away.

As Furey uncorked the bottle, Elam took a sip of cider. It was so sweet that he was unsure if he cared for it. He scanned the room as he took another drink. No one seemed to pay him any attention. The anonymity was consoling. He was about to return his attention to Furey when an old man seated in the back of the room caught his eye. The man held a mug in one wrinkled hand and a gold pocket watch in the other. Elam observed as the man placed the watch in his breast pocket, took a long swig from the mug, and turned.

Elam and the man made eye contact, and Elam wheeled back in shock. His body slammed against the table, spilling the cider across the tabletop and onto Furey’s lap.

“E...Devon! What is it?”

Elam barely heard Furey as he watched the old man rise from the barstool and take a step forward. “I-I need to go.”

“Where are you going?” Furey climbed out of the booth as Elam forced his way through the crowded room and disappeared into the street. “Devon!”

Elam heard Furey calling after him, but he didn’t stop. He didn’t want to stop. He did not want to talk, to explain, to think. He turned down an alley, away from the bustle of the street, but soon felt Furey grab his arm. “Let go!”

“What happened in there?”

“Furey, let go! Let me go and I’ll tell you!” Furey released his arm, and he backed away. Panting, he leaned against a wall. “That son of a—”

“Elam—”

“He’s everywhere!”

“What are you talking about? Was there a Shadow?”

Elam laughed. “A Shadow? He’s too much of a coward! I swear I’ll kill him!”

“Elam—”

“Let me be alone!” He raced down the alley and vanished amid the shadows. Running was all he could think to do. The image of the old man’s face flashed through his mind and struck him with another intense wave of anger. Normally he would be able to clear his mind by running, but even as he ran through Ember’s alleyways he could not rid himself of his rage. It burned inside him from the pit of his stomach and burst through every vein of his body until he physically sweated due to its intensity. *How did he know where to find me?*

He ran for what felt like hours, not caring or knowing where he was going, and stopped only when his legs gave out from exhaustion. He fell to his knees in an alley, struggled to find breath, he scanned his surroundings. There was no one in the streets. A candle was lit in a window several stories above, but that was all. He crawled toward a wagon parked a few yards away and felt safer as he crouched next to it, even though the alley was dark. His hands clutched the spokes of one of the wheels as he tried to catch his breath.

“Where are we going?”

The voice sounded close, only a street away. Keeping himself low, Elam turned onto his chest and looked between the spokes of the wheel. Firelight reflected off of the windows of nearby buildings. *Breathe. Breathe.*

A group of men appeared where the alley met the street, and Elam could easily distinguish the familiar scar on one man’s face.

“Darien!”

Darien turned at the sound of his name. “What?”

Elam could not hear what came next. The men's voices were deep and muffled. He strained to hear.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Darien said loudly in response to one of the men.

There was more muddled talk.

Elam felt lightheaded from holding his breath. Quietly, he drew in some air and held his breath again, afraid that the slightest sound would give him away. A fly buzzed by his ear, but he ignored it.

"The boy!"

Elam flinched as those two syllables rose above the rest of the voices.

"How should I know?" shouted Darien.

"You're leading us blindly!"

Elam saw Darien draw his knife on one of the men. "Say that again, and you're a dead man. We had him last night. I *held* him last night. I could feel the blood pulsing through his neck. He was ours, but *you* let him escape."

"There was a—"

"Shut up! Were you frightened by the fire? Is that your excuse for letting him escape?"

"N-no—"

"If I hear you mention that fire again, I'll personally light the biggest fire ever seen at the Towers and throw your miserable ass in it! And that goes to any one of you who uses that excuse!"

Elam kept his eyes on the gravel beneath him, and a single plea resounded in his mind:
Leave me alone.

He did not move for a long time, even after the Shadows disappeared down another street. The night air was cold and crisp and bit at his face, but he refused to budge. His fingers had grown clammy while clinging to the spokes, and he had been crouching for so long that his knees stung from the gravel digging into his skin. But he knew how to ignore pain. Only when he could no longer bear the biting cold did he take off running.

I'm never going back, he thought to himself as he ran down the alleyways. He felt how numb his hands were, the soreness in his knees. *You'll never hurt me again*.

Yet he knew that he was only telling another lie. He could run from many things. He could lie to himself so continuously that fiction could become his reality. There was only one thing in the entire world of his existence that he believed was inescapable, and he was reminded of it every time he looked south of Ember and saw the distorted horizon.

Furey's Choice

Furey walked home along the dark road. Not a sound echoed down the street or was heard from the stone buildings surrounding him on either side. The air was quiet, too quiet, making him hurry his steps. The stillness of the night made him restless, and he quickly passed by any shadowed corner or store. He was not afraid of the dark. He hated silence.

The street forked off, and Furey turned left down an arched alley. He descended a flight of stone steps, eagerly awaiting the warm fire he had lit that morning in the hearth. It should not have died out. His fingers twitched at the thought of fire and began making fists and shapes, as they always did when he touched his fire. He formed a butterfly, linking his thumbs together and waving his other fingers as if pretending to make it fly. As he unlinked his thumbs, a blazing butterfly flew out from them, fluttered around the alley, and was extinguished as quickly as it had appeared. Furey smiled. His greatest skill was forming fiery creatures out of the air. He was also gifted at performing other tricks with the flames, such as juggling torches or balls of fire, walking through flames, breathing fire, but any firedancer could juggle a few torches. It required great skill to summon fire from nothing—and even more importantly, control it—and Furey had mastered the birth-given talent long ago.

As he passed another street, he saw a firedancer performing a night show. Torches twirled through the air and propelled sparks in all directions. Fire raged from the man's mouth and illuminated even the alley from which Furey watched. The flames raced through the street then vanished as the firedancer made a strange gesture with his hands.

Furey thought about performing. He would make a blazing lion erupt from his mouth rather than a mere flame. He was itching to play with fire, and his fingers twitched on their own

accord. His feet led him toward the firedancer and the crowd of nearly twenty people, mostly laborers who craved amusement. He was so engulfed in his own intentions that he did not realize the firedancer was finishing his performance.

The man smiled proudly as the crowd applauded. Furey was now only a few feet from the crowd. He could benefit from a few coins, which he could easily make in less than a minute. The money would surely please his wife, Anika. He had not made as much money from his performances today as he had hoped.

He was drawn from his thoughts when the crowd began to disperse. The show was now over. After collecting his coins, the firedancer yawned loudly as he headed off. Furey's shoulders drooped in disappointment. His hands had itched to dance with fire, but now that the street was deserted the experience would not be as fulfilling. Seeing the astonished expressions of onlookers as he performed made dancing with his fire even more exhilarating.

He stared up at the sky. Doing so usually lightened his mood. A thin sliver of the moon hovered over Ember: 'a giant fingernail,' as Anika liked to call it. Anika. Her name made him smile. He really should get back to her. She would likely be tired and up waiting for him.

His walked past the wealthy three-story homes, past the taverns and shops, until he reached the edge of Ember where few buildings were inhabited. He could see his small home on one of the nearby hills, and he stopped to admire it.

It was not much of a structure, but Furey loved it. Anika's herb and vegetable garden sat to the right side, and some fruit trees grew to the left. He continued toward his house in anticipation. He could already feel Anika's warm arms around him and could hear her gentle voice.

"Furey? Furey!"

Furey turned just as a figure collided into him. Furey staggered back and stared. “Elam?”

The boy was out of breath, wheezing and coughing as if he had just run the entire city’s length. He doubled over and leaned on his knees as he tried to speak. “Darien...you need to get home...” He choked and wiped his sweating face while attempting to catch his breath.

“What? Elam, I can’t understand you!” Furey laid his hands on Elam’s shoulders.
“Calm down.”

“I saw him. I was in an alley. He had lots of men with him...they almost saw me!”

“You need to get out of the streets.” Furey looked up at his house, about a quarter of a mile away from the city. “Come with me. You can stay at my house until we think of what to do next.” He took hold of Elam’s arm, but Elam pulled away.

“No, Furey! If Darien—”

“He won’t—”

“No!”

Footsteps crunched against the rocks further down the street, and flames reflected off the windows. A voice echoed, “This way! I hear something!”

“It’s him,” Elam whimpered.

Furey held his breath and demanded in a whisper, “Elam, get yourself out of here. Now!”

Fear glistened in Elam’s eyes as he frantically searched for a place to hide. He felt faint. Seeing no other option, he ran toward the hill.

“No!” Furey grabbed his arm. “They’ll see you.” He dragged Elam toward an abandoned bakery where a sign dangled from a single hook. “In here.” He kicked open the door and pushed Elam into the darkness. “I’ll come and get you when they’re gone.”

“No! Furey—”

Furey slammed the door shut and spun around as he heard the Shadows approaching. There was no place to hide. The windows of the building in which Elam was trapped were covered by heavy boards so he could not see when Darien was gone, and the alleys were too open to serve as a hiding place.

“Who do we have here?”

Furey whirled around to find Darien and a group of Shadows standing a few feet away. He took a step back.

Darien held out a torch. “You remind me of someone,” he mused, “but you’re no more than one of those beggars living in the streets.” He inspected Furey’s brown jacket, which was in need of mending.

“I’m a firedancer.” Furey tried to look into Darien’s eyes directly to hide his fear.

“A firedancer?” Darien raised an eyebrow and snorted. “If that’s the case, you must not be afraid of my flame here.” He moved the torch back and forth across Furey’s sweating face. The fire tingled his cheeks but did not burn him. “Maybe,” Darien said, dropping the torch at Furey’s feet and reaching for the knife at his belt, “you would be more afraid of this?” He drew forth his knife and ran the blade across Furey’s cheek. “Am I right?” He watched the firedancer tremble as the blade neared his neck, and chuckled. “That’s what I thought.”

Furey closed his eyes as the knife moved across his cheek. He felt the steel against his skin, sending gooseflesh down his spine. *Summon fire. You could kill him! No. No, you swore you’d never...* The tip of the blade made a thin cut on his cheek, and his eyes flew open. Staggering back, he found himself cornered against a wall. In a faint whisper, he asked, “What do you want with me?”

A roar of laughter erupted from the Shadows behind Darien.

“What’s your name?” Darien asked.

“Furey.”

Darien examined Furey’s face, forcing it side to side with his knife. A look of realization appeared on the scarred face. “Oh, Furey! You’re that popular firedancer, aren’t you? Some say you are the best on this side of the Green Sea. Why don’t you put on a little show?”

“It’d be an honor, but I need to get home.” Furey tried to push away, but Darien pushed him against the wall.

Darien’s gaze followed Furey’s toward the little house on the hill. “You have a lady waiting for you there? How about she and I get acquainted, and I’ll let my men deal with you.”

“Don’t touch her!” Furey recoiled as Darien’s hand smacked his face. He held his bleeding nose in his hands.

“You don’t want me to touch her?” Darien said, wiping the blood on his knuckles onto his pants. “Then do as I say. There would be only one reason I would waste my time talking to someone as petty as you. You performers see every person who walks these streets. That fact is beneficial to me.” His brow furrowed, and his dark eyes turned to slits. “Have you seen Elam?”

Furey lowered his hands. “Elam? That kid Afieus wants? How am I supposed to know? He’s been missing for years.”

Darien drew a breath and played with his knife. “Furey, I pride myself on being able to separate men who lie and men who are truthful. You are a liar.”

“I’m not!”

“Do you take me for an idiot?”

“I swear to you, I haven’t seen him! I’m just trying to go home—” Furey squeezed his eyes shut as Darien’s fist swung at his head, knocking him to the ground. “You’re wasting your time,” he stammered as he was hauled to his feet.

“Listen firedancer. I am a reasonable man, but you are toying with my patience.”

Furey’s head throbbed. *Summon fire.* “Let me go home. I don’t know—”

“Come on, kid,” Darien spat, pressing his blade against Furey’s cheek. “I know you’re lying. Tell me where Elam is! I won’t hurt you, I won’t lay a hand on your wife, and you two can wake up tomorrow like none of this ever happened.”

“Why should I trust you?” Furey forced the words between heavy breaths. “I don’t know where he is.” He felt the dagger move across his cheek, down his neck, his shoulder.

A rush of pain flooded Furey’s arm, and he cried in panic.

“Your life is nothing to me, firedancer,” Darien said in Furey’s ear. He dug the blade deeper into Furey’s shoulder and watched as bright red blood flowed from the wound. “You can keep it if you just hand over the boy.”

Furey’s mind raced as blood soaked his shirt. He tried to think, tried to free himself. He had to confess. He had to. He screamed as Darien twisted the blade. “I can’t tell you!”

The knife was ripped from his shoulder, and Furey collapsed on the ground. He lay there, waiting for the inevitable wave of pain to come and sweep him away. He had oftentimes wondered what death was like. He could remember stories of a beautiful place to which every good soul went after this life and of horrors that awaited all those with evil hearts. It sounded like a joke. He had seen people spend their entire lives in fear of what was to come in the next, never taking advantage of the enjoyments offered by the world. The stories were no more than a means of making life dismal and burdensome, and he had found any idea of worrying about an

afterlife futile. But now, he suddenly wished that there were such a place awaiting him when life left him.

Furey sensed Darien beside him and felt the Shadow's breath on his stifling neck. Helplessly, anxiously, he waited.

Darien stroked the firedancer's hair and wiped a tear from his cheek. "Don't be afraid, Furey. I'm going to give you one last chance. I am a man of mercy." He gripped the blond hair and pulled Furey to his feet. "I feel like now would be a good time for us to take you home, firedancer. Introduce me and my men to your wife."

"No—"

"Do you have a child?"

"Don't touch them!"

A grin stretched across the scarred face. "You do have a child! A baby? I love babies."

"Go to hell!"

"Refresh my memory. Perhaps you will talk if the lives of your wife and child are at stake?"

"No!" Furey fell to his knees and clung to Darien's shirt. "Kill me instead! Don't touch them!" Darien's fingers pressed into his shoulder, sending fresh jolts of pain down his arm, but he ignored it. "Do whatever you want to me. Just let my family live!"

"That isn't what I said, boy. You're strong but not that smart. I gave you two options. Either you tell us where Elam is, or your wife and child die. It's very simple."

Furey lost hold of Darien's shirt and fell onto his back. He heard the Shadow's voice, distant and muffled. He could not comprehend a word. He could no longer ignore the pain shooting down his soaking arm, and he felt like he was spiraling into darkness. *Do what he*

wants, since you're too stubborn to burn him alive. Just do it. Anika. Anika. Anika. In his fading world, Furey stared up at Darien. He opened his mouth to speak but was too overwhelmed to force a sound.

“You won’t tell me? I’m surprised.” Darien turned to one of the waiting men. “Grab him. Bring him with us. Let him explain to his wife how she and her child are going to die thanks to the stubbornness of her husband.”

Furey could barely hear a word of what Darien said. He could only hear noise, could only see the blurred figures of men standing around him. He thought he had heard Darien speaking about Anika again, but he was not sure.

He felt someone grab him and haul him to his feet. As his feet hit the dirt path leading up the hill, adrenaline rushed through his veins. “Stop!” He knew what waited for him at the end of that path. These men would not go there. Not tonight. Not ever. He would die to ensure that. “I’ll tell you where he is. Just don’t hurt Anika!”

The men stopped.

“That’s more like it, Furey,” Darien said. “It took you long enough. Now where’s Elam?” He held his stained knife toward Furey.

Furey ignored the blade coated in his blood. “Only if you swear you won’t go to that house.”

“We had an agreement, and I keep my word. Now where’s the boy?” Darien’s voice rose. The firedancer hesitated then nodded toward the dilapidated bakery. Darien shoved past him, and the Shadows followed.

Darien kicked down the door and entered the building. A haze lingered in the stale air, and the smell of dust made it hard to breathe. One of the Shadows held up a torch to reveal

broken furniture, pots, and barrels. “Look everywhere!” Darien barked. The men obeyed, covering their mouths and noses with their sleeves, emptying barrels, and turning over tables and chairs.

After watching his men search, Darien turned on Furey. “If you are lying to me—”

One of the men came to Darien. “He’s not here!”

Darien looked into the shop. Everything was overturned or ripped apart. “What do you mean he’s not here? He has to be here!”

“We searched everywhere. He isn’t here.”

“Well look again!” The veins in Darien’s temples bulged as he approached Furey. “Do you think I’m a fool, boy?” he asked, grasping Furey’s face in his hand. Furey stared at him in disbelief, to which Darien responded with a slap to the face. “If that boy does not show up...”

Darien pressed his knife against Furey’s cheek, and Furey held his breath as the blade neared his neck.

“He’s gone!” This time a different man reported back. Darien spun around. “We searched the whole place. There’s no one here.” The Shadow paused for a moment and stared at Furey. “Of course, we do have him.” He drew his sword and pointed it at Furey’s chest.

Darien stared at Furey as if debating what he should do or how he should carry it out. “You men have been faithful followers this night,” he said, addressing the Shadows yet keeping eye contact with Furey. “No blades.” A smile twitched at the sides of his lips, and he threw Furey into the middle of the square.

Before Furey’s head hit the ground, the Shadows surrounded him and began throwing punches and kicking and spitting. He curled into a fetal position, tried to cover his head with his

arms, but someone grabbed his hair and jerked his head up. He was momentarily blinded as a man spit in his eyes and another stepped on his ribcage.

Darien leaned against a wall and twirled his knife between his fingers. He watched the men for a while, waited until Furey's shouting had ceased, then held up his hand. "Enough."

Laughing, the men stepped away.

Darien approached and knelt beside Furey. He wiped blood from Furey's face and ran it through the blond hair. Furey didn't even flinch when Darien again pressed a finger into his shoulder. "Let's go." Darien stood and began walking toward the alley and his men. He looked back to see that Furey had not moved, but a small flame danced in his palm.

Furey's eyes slowly opened, and he watched the Shadows become one with the night. Once he could no longer hear them, he rolled onto his back. The small movement nearly made him faint. He heard rustling in the direction of the bakery, and he tried to lift his head to see.

"Furey?"

Furey opened and shut his mouth, trying his best to speak. "Devon?" A figure approached him, and he thought he was hallucinating when he saw Elam's face above him. "How..."

"This is all my fault, Furey!" Elam knelt beside him and hoisted him into a sitting position. "I'm so sorry."

"Don't...don't be. Move."

"What?"

"Move." Furey moved his hand as though ushering Elam away.

"I don't want to leave you."

"Just...move." Elam helped Furey sit up then backed away. Furey drew several painful breaths and closed his eyes. The small flame in his palm grew until it surrounded his entire hand.

It continued to grow, moving up his arm, covering his shoulders like a shawl, and descending his other arm. He sat there in his flames, breathing slowly. His hair flowed as though it were in water rather than fire. He let out a moan as a warm rush flooded his being from the inside. He kept breathing steadily, as the fire seared away his pain. He opened his eyes and looked through the blaze to see Elam staring in alarm a few feet away. He had almost forgotten about him. He exhaled again, and the flames vanished in a wave of smoke.

“What the hell was that?”

Furey made himself stand. His legs wobbled and his shoulder and nose still bled, but the pain was tolerable now. “I want to go home.”

Elam stumbled to his feet. “Yeah. Do that.”

“Let’s go.”

“Let’s?”

“Let’s. I need help getting up that hill, and you’re not staying out here alone.”

“You should be dead after all that!”

“But I not. Now let’s go.”

There was fierceness in Furey’s voice that Elam had never heard before. He wrapped Furey’s arm around his shoulder and led him toward the hill.

Shadows loomed on the hillside like giant black sheets, and the sky shone bright with stars. To Elam, the night seemed too clear, too peaceful, after what had happened, and he could not help but want to run away whenever Furey gripped at his shoulder or had to stop and catch his breath.

After a while, Furey asked, “How did they not find you?”

“There was a cellar,” Elam replied. “I hid down there.”

“Oh. Smart.”

“Why didn’t you use your fire?”

Furey stopped walking. “I used it when it mattered.”

“You could’ve killed them!”

“Get me home.”

“But—”

“Get me home!” Furey winced and held a hand to his chest. A flame grew beneath his palm then seemed to disappear into his breast. He drew a breath and stared up at his house. “I want to go home.”

When they reached the house, Elam said, “I’ll only stay one night. Then I’m leaving.”

Furey said nothing and pushed open the door. The house was amazingly cramped. Only three small rooms made up the bottom floor: a sitting room and closet to the left, and a kitchen to the right. A stairwell leading to the second floor took up most of the remaining space. Shelves lined one wall and were covered in drying flowers and herbs, and a drying rack hung from the ceiling where purple flowers and mint leaves dangled down like tinsel. Torches lie in a pile on one of the upper shelves, waiting for Furey to come and play with them and his fire. Elam could not imagine him surviving without it.

Elam guided Furey into the kitchen. A fire blazed in the hearth, where a pot of soup boiled over the flames. Its aroma made him want to vomit. A table and four chairs took up most of the room, and a young woman with long red hair who looked at least six months pregnant dozed in one of the chairs in front of the flames. “Who’s that?” Elam whispered.

Furey approached the woman and leaned his weight against the table. “Anika.”

Anika jumped. “Furey, you scared me,” she said, as she rose to her feet. “What kept you so—” Her complexion grew pale when she turned and saw him. “Furey!” She rushed to him, held his beaten face in her delicate hands, and eased him into a chair.

“Anika.” His clung to her dress, staining the tan material with bloody handprints.

“What happened to you? Who did this?”

Furey hesitated but knew better than to lie to her. “Darien.”

“Darien?” Anika said the name with caution. “What did he want with you?” She finally caught sight of Elam, uncomfortable and blameworthy, standing near the doorway. “Who’s that?”

Furey began slowly, “That’s Elam.”

Anika turned to Furey, then Elam. “You’re Elam?”

Elam didn’t look at her. He braced himself as the seconds passed, half expecting her to strike him. He paid his attention on a window and the moon’s light flooding into the room.

“Furey’s told me about you,” Anika continued. She rubbed her belly and looked back at her husband. “Let’s get you upstairs, Furey.

“I’ll help,” Elam said. He stepped back as Anika stood between him and Furey. “This is my fault, I know. And I’m sorry—”

“He could have died because of you.”

“I know.”

“He told me you were friends. Why didn’t you help him?”

“I…” Elam flinched as Anika took his face in her hands. Her green eyes stared deeply into his, and he wished he could close his eyes. He couldn’t make himself turn away. “I’ll go. I just was helping him get home.”

“Help me get him to bed.” Anika wrapped her arm around Furey’s back and tried to guide him to his feet. “He’s asleep. Furey. Furey, wake up. Come on. Help me, Elam,” she said again, her voice rising.

Elam obeyed, supporting Furey on the side of his injured shoulder. He tried to not touch the wound but soon felt the warm wetness of blood soaking his shirt.

Furey’s head bobbed and his eyes slowly opened as he was lifted him from the chair and led from the kitchen. “I want to go home,” he muttered.

“You are home, Furey,” Anika said. “Let’s get up the stairs. Then you can sleep. Here we go. That’s one step. Just a few more. Two. Good. Three.” She counted every step for him until they reached the landing and stepped into the bedroom. Furey collapsed on the bed, and his eyes were closed before his head hit the pillow.

Elam stood in the doorway as Anika opened a window then started bandaging her husband’s shoulder with some strips of fabric. After a while, he turned toward the stairs and stood at the top, staring down at the floor below that suddenly looked very far away. His hand gripped the rail, and he took a step. *One... Two... Three... Four... Five...* He stumbled down the rest and nearly slipped on the last. His head felt light, as though he had been holding his breath for a long time and hadn’t exhaled. His throat stung as air passed through, in and out, in and out. He walked to the door and grasped the handle. The cold brass sent a shiver up his arm and down his spine, and he fell to his knees. He knelt there for a while, breathing deep breaths yet unable to fill his lungs, his hand still gripping the knob. He tried to stand, but his legs refused him. He slumped against the door and felt the rough wood rub against his cheek. He looked up the stairs, heard Anika quietly weeping, and closed his eyes. Even in the darkness, all he could see was

Furey's tortured body. His ears rang with Anika's cries. He opened his eyes but could still only see Furey. Then everything went black.

Darien's Recompense

As the sun rose above the Wayless Mountains, Darien and his band of Shadows passed through the Towers' gates. Darien stared up at them as he walked by. They stood like two giant trellises. He remembered the first time he stepped through them, the way they shone when the sun's rays landed on them from just the right angle. Over the years, weather and neglect had dulled their shine, so now they stood like a pair of dark looming giants guarding the entrance of the Towers. He had been only a child when he first entered the Towers, so there was the possibility that the gates never shone at all and that he made up the whole idea.

The Shadows dispersed once they entered the courtyard. Darien heard many of them murmuring about exhaustion and hunger. He rolled his eyes and tried his best to ignore them. For a while after they were gone, he wandered alone through the courtyard. It was cool in the morning air and illuminated by the few rays of sunlight that managed to reach over the walls. He stepped through gardens of dandelions and buttercups, knotweed and purslane, and scratched at the chipping stepping-stones with the toe of his shoe.

From high in a turret, a voice echoed in the expansive courtyard, "Darien! Empty handed again!"

Darien shot a look toward the turrets near the gates, but he could make out no one amid the shadows. He started toward a door.

"Afieus is in the banquet hall," the voice called again. "He requests your presence."

Darien said nothing, only continued toward the door.

"May he have mercy on your failures."

Darien swung open the door as the voice began to laugh then slammed it shut behind him.

Afieus was at table, dining with his wife. Darien made his presence known to the guard at the door, who allowed him to enter. A long table stretched half the length of the banquet hall and was decorated with candelabras and an elegant black lace tablecloth. Silver platters were heaped high with fruit: oranges, mangos, peaches, apples, sliced pineapple, coconuts. Pheasant, duck, turkey, and pork were arranged on even larger plates. Varieties of warm breads lay on breadboards scattered across the table and were accompanied by butters and fruit spreads. Darien approached the table and eyed the head of a hog. The beast appeared to be staring at him. He turned his attention to a maid squatting beneath the table and massaging Afieus' feet with a look of contempt. Her eyes met his as he came forward.

"What's the problem?" Afieus demanded of her as she ceased rubbing his foot for a moment. "Did I give you permission to stop?" The maid quickly resumed the task as Afieus, who did not notice Darien, reached for a turkey thigh. Darien cleared his throat to gain Afieus' attention. "What?" Afieus snapped as he turned to see who had dared interrupt his meal. "Oh. Darien."

Darien stepped forward, hungrily eyeing the feast.

"Sit," Afieus said.

Darien knelt before him then reclined in a wooden armchair beside his master.

The maid under the table leaned to see what was occurring above her.

"Need I tell you again to follow orders?" Afieus shouted. "Nothing we say concerns you! I can relieve you of this task and make you scrub every corridor until your hands bleed." The maid immediately bent her head and resumed. Afieus said something under his breath. Darien

could not hear and stabbed a pheasant breast with a knife. “You didn’t find Elam,” Afieus said as he took a bite of the bird. Darien didn’t move. He barely breathed. “I’m not surprised, though,” Afieus sighed. “It’s been two years since I’ve seen my boy. Tell me, Darien, does it not seem rational that I have begun to lose confidence in you?”

“What?” Darien stared as Afieus’ teeth gnashed into the pheasant’s breast. A stream of juices flowed from the bird’s flesh and dripped onto the tablecloth.

“I asked,” Afieus replied with a mouth full of food, “does it not seem rational that I have begun to lose confidence in you?”

“Rational? It’s senseless!”

Afieus poured himself goblet of red wine and sipped it slowly. He offered the bottle to his wife. “Luchesna.”

The woman shook her head. “No thank you, my lord.”

“Drink.”

Luchesna took the bottle and poured some into her goblet. “Thank you, my lord.”

Afieus took the bottle from her and set it by his plate. “Elaborate, Darien”

Darien’s mouth opened and shut stupidly for a moment until he could speak. “What must I say? When have I ever forsaken you or made you question my loyalty? I do whatever you command. Never once have I complained when you chastised me. What more must I do for you?”

“You have yet to bring me the boy.” Afieus eyed his Shadow as he took a long drink from his goblet.

“Elam ran away!” Darien’s fists slammed on the table. The platters rattled, wine sloshed out of the goblets, and Luchesna jumped in her seat.

Afieus looked at his wife to make certain she was not distressed by the outburst then returned his attention to Darien. “He ran away two years ago.”

“I had him the other night, Afieus. I held him in my arms!”

“Yes! You had him, yet you failed. You let him escape.”

“I didn’t let him escape! There was a fire—”

“That’s enough!” Afieus leapt from his seat, grabbed the tablecloth, and whipped it from the table. The platters were flung in all directions. The grand feast laid out moments ago was now strewn across the stone floors.

Darien leapt to his feet and wiped steaming gravy and collard greens from his shirt and face.

“Luchesna! Girl!” Afieus ordered his wife and the maid. “Leave us!”

Both women quickly fled the dining hall.

“You listen to me,” Afieus said, turning on Darien. “I am through with your excuses. My patience is wearing thin. I have many Shadows, Darien, many of whom are your equal in strength and aggression.”

“My lord—”

“But there is something I see in you that I have never before seen in any of my men. I supposed there have been many attractive attributes of men I’ve killed. It’s a shame that their talents had to be left hanging at the gallows, but it was their time. Tell me, Darien—”

“Afieus—”

“Is it your time?”

“No!” Darien folded into the chair as Afieus struck him. His cheek burned, and he struggled against Afieus’ hold of his wrists. “What are you doing?”

“I loathe burdens,” Afieus said, forcing Darien’s hands down on the armrests. “Elam was a burden, he remains a burden, but I never thought that you would become burdensome. I can’t have you holding me back any longer. Why should I keep you if you consistently fail? Tell me.”

The room was silent as sweat poured down Darien’s face. He tried to speak but with no success.

“You have no answer. So I am to believe that you are worthless to me.”

Darien opened his mouth, but, again, he could utter no sound. Deep within his chest, his heart pounded so furiously that he could feel the beating in his throat. It nearly choked him. Afieus wouldn’t kill him. Would he? He stared at the familiar gray eyes that he could no longer read. “You want to kill me? Fine. Kill me.” He held his breath as Afieus pulled him from the chair, forced him to his knees, and drew his sword. He felt the coolness of the blade on his neck. “Do it.”

“You dare to tempt me?”

Darien only stared at him.

“Just find him, Darien! FIND HIM!”

Darien grunted as Afieus slammed the butt of the sword against his head. He fell on his chest and blinked rapidly as he saw double. A searing pain tore through his back. He tried to push himself up, arms trembling, half expecting Afieus to detain him. Struggling, with held-back tears stinging his eyes, he sat back on his heels, gripped at his pants, and drew heavy breaths. He felt his back grow warm and sticky with blood, and his teeth gnawed on his lower lip until it too ached and bled. He tasted the warm metallic juice on his tongue and felt it slide down his throat. He stared at Afieus and rose to his feet. “May I go now?”

Afieus stepped forward and wiped the blood from his sword onto Darien’s shirt.

Darien stood motionless until Afieus returned the sword to its sheath. He looked down and saw the red smear across his chest, mixed with gravy stains and greens. “May...I...go?” Blood rushed to his face as Afieus sat back in his chair, looked around at the mess, and scooped up a mostly empty bottle of wine. He took a long swig.

“Drink?” Afieus held out the bottle.

Darien grabbed it and drank until every drop was gone.

“Go clean yourself.”

Darien watched as Afieus grabbed a half-eaten turkey leg from the floor and bit off a chunk. “Yes, my lord.”

“Darien,” Afieus called once Darien was near the door.

Darien turned back to see Afieus tearing off another large piece. “Yes?”

“Don’t tempt me again.” He tapped on the sheath at his waist.

“You’re merciful, my lord.”

“Get out.”

Darien quickly left the room. He pressed his hands against the walls and felt his way down the corridor, tossing like ocean waves. People passed by as he slowly maneuvered back to his room. He ignored all of them. After what felt like hours, he arrived at the door to his room. His hands fumbled with the handle until he managed to swing the door open and then crumpled on the bed.

“Darien?”

Darien turned his head and cursed himself for not shutting the door behind him. “Go away, Merek.”

The Shadow ignored him and entered the room.

“Go away.” Darien groaned in annoyance as Merek sat next to him.

“What in hell happened to you?”

“I said go away!”

“I’ll be right back.” Merek quickly left the room.

“No, Merek—” But the Shadow was gone. Darien pressed his head into his pillow until it was hard to breathe, partially wishing to suffocate himself.

Merek soon returned and again sat beside Darien. “Don’t move.”

“What are you doing?” He felt the back of his shirt being torn open and flinched as a stinging pain shot down his spine. He looked back to see Merek awkwardly attempting to stitch the laceration. “Don’t—”

“Shut up. It’ll get infected if I don’t.”

“You’ll infect it just by touching it.”

“Stop being a smartass. You think I want to touch this mess? Now hold still.”

Again, Darien pressed his face into the pillow until he felt lightheaded. He eventually grew numb to the sting of the needle and rough tug of the thread. Before Merek was finished stitching, Darien was asleep and snoring loudly.

A Cold Bath

He thought he was dead. He had to be. When else could there be only darkness, darkness with no dreams? But he felt warm. He could hear, too; the sound of a rooster's call was clear. Was he imagining it all? Perhaps you imagined things from your life when you were dead.

Elam rolled onto his back, not opening his eyes. His hand touch something rough, and he ran his fingers across it. It didn't feel cold or sharp like a knife, but rather it prickled his skin like little needles. Slowly, he opened his eyes, one at a time, and saw sunlight. His hand was pressed against a wooden wall.

He rolled onto his side and looked around. He was on the floor of a small room and staring between the legs of an old armchair. He sat up and leaned on his elbows. Voices sounded from somewhere nearby, and he immediately recognized one. *Furey*. He thought he had left the house the night before, but clearly he hadn't. He only remembered reaching for the doorknob. Had he passed out? He looked down to see he was lying atop a quilt and covered by a thin blanket.

He stood and stretched his arms and legs, paying attention to the warm ache in his muscles. They weren't numb from the cold or sore from poison ivy. They felt like they actually belonged to his body. He moved his fingers. Even they felt warm. Alive.

Elam heard himself laugh. He had a nice laugh and realized this was the first time in a long while that he actually listened to the sound of his own laugh. He had almost forgotten what it sounded like. He laughed again. And again. He felt strange, like nothing could possibly harm him. This was of course a total lie, and he knew that, but he let that false reality give him a sense of hope from which he had long been deprived.

His eyes fell upon a brown drawstring bag heaped at the end of the blankets. Naturally curious, he opened it. His eyes widened as he saw what was inside. He pulled out a crisp shirt. It was white, like the one he now wore, but this new shirt had all the buttons sewn to the front and was not frayed nearly to the point of disintegrating. There were pants, too, which were not worn or stained.

He tore off his old clothes and grabbed the clean shirt. Just as he was about to pull on the sleeves, he saw the scars.

He stood there frozen, naked, staring down at the many forgotten distortions in his flesh. They had gone unnoticed for so long, yet for some reason he now became aware of their existence. The sight of his own naked body terrified him.

He quickly buttoned up the shirt. He then changed into the pants and noticed how they went past his ankles unlike his old pair. After tying his belt around his waist and securing his knife, he started for the door. *There's nothing to worry about*, he told himself, as he stood motionless in the doorway.

He took a step into the hallway and could now see into the kitchen. Furey was seated at the table, facing away from him, and Anika was tending to something cooking over the fire. He drew a breath and stepped forward. He was about to enter the kitchen when he noticed something in the periphery of his vision. It was a mirror, placed against the wall by the front door. He hadn't noticed it last night in the dark. He put his head down and moved away from the glass. He had seen the rest of his body, but what about his face? Slowly, and with great caution, he approached the mirror, taking care to remain far enough away from the glass so he could not see himself just yet, afraid he would be horrified by his own reflection. He squeezed his eyes shut as he stepped in front of it.

The mirror was full length, and Elam was stunned by the image before him. “This is me?” he slowly whispered. The image moved its lips in unison with him. He stretched out a hand and touched the glass. He was not looking at the boy he remembered. This new one was taller, thinner, with more muscle. His hair was filthy and snarled and fell just above his shoulders. He moved closer to the mirror, close enough so his breath fogged the glass. He remembered his face being rounder, smoother.

He stared at the deep scar by his right ear, and a wave of anger flooded him as he felt the raised flesh beneath his touch. He remembered in great detail the day he received it. He was reminded of it whenever he heard a sound, as the wound had left that ear deaf and useless.

He stood back and surveyed himself again. If he could somehow remove the dark circles under his eyes, he really was not that bad looking. From what he could tell beneath the dirt, his hair was a nice blond color, and his body was proportioned. As long as his clothes and hair covered the scars, he looked normal. He leaned closer to the mirror once more and gazed into his own eyes. His mother used to call them “her blue stars.” The memory made him smile.

“Good morning.” Smiling and holding a dirty towel, Furey appeared from the kitchen. His shoulder was wrapped carefully in fresh bandages.

Elam quickly turned from the mirror. “Uh...hi...I was just...I haven’t seen myself for a while.” He felt his face grow hot.

“No need to be embarrassed,” Furey laughed. “That’s what mirrors are for. I see you found the clothes Anika left for you,” he added, acknowledging Elam’s clean white shirt.

“Anika left me these?”

Furey nodded. “Breakfast?” He pointed toward the kitchen.

“Sure. How are you feeling?”

A flame burst to life on Furey's shoulder and traveled down to his chest, where it disappeared. "Let's get something to eat."

They entered the kitchen, and Furey resumed his seat at the table. Elam stood by the door and watched Anika. Although her stomach was huge, the woman could move. She scurried from the fire to the cabinets, where she grabbed a bowl and ladle, then returned to the fire and scooped out a large portion. Her hands trembled as she placed the bowl on the table, and the ladle fell from her hands and landed on the floor. As she spread her legs apart and tried to inch her way down to retrieve it, Elam rushed to her and picked it up.

"Here," he said, offering it to her as she stood upright again.

"Oh. You're up. Thank you." She tossed the ladle across the room into a pail of dirty dishes. "I see you found the clothes. They're Furey's, so they might be a little big for you."

"They fit great. Thanks."

A smile pulled at her lips, and she tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "Did you sleep well?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Anika gave a little laugh. "Nice manners for a fugitive. Get another ladle from the cupboard and another bowl and help yourself," she said, motioning to the pot above the fire. "It's vegetable stew."

Elam went to the cupboard, grabbed a bowl and ladle, and filled the bowl. He sat beside Furey and began to eat.

Anika gave Furey the bowl she had prepared then sat across from him and Elam.

"Aren't you going to eat?" Furey asked her.

"I'm not hungry."

“You need to, Anika.”

“I’ll eat when I’m hungry.”

“Do you feel alright?”

“I feel fine.”

Elam watched as she rose from her chair and started for a door leading from the kitchen to outside.

“Where are you going?” Furey asked.

“To get eggs from out back. We need eggs.”

“We don’t need—” He was cut off as Anika opened the door and disappeared outside.

Elam looked at Furey then followed his gaze to the counter, where there sat a bowl filled with nearly a dozen eggs.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with her,” Furey said, looking at his spoon then setting it back in the bowl.

“She’s probably upset that I’m here.”

Furey shook his head. “She’s been like this for a few weeks.”

“Maybe it’s because she’s pregnant,” Elam offered, swallowing another spoonful of soup.

“No. No, that doesn’t make sense.”

“Yes it does.” Elam took another spoonful, looked back at the bowl of eggs, then back at Furey. For the first time, he noticed a metal band on his friend’s finger. “Why didn’t you tell me yesterday that you were married?”

“Do you think it’s because of me?”

“What?”

“The way she’s acting. Do you think it’s because of something I did?”

“Well, you got her pregnant.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

Elam took another sip. “I don’t know.”

Furey sighed and pressed his hand to his shoulder.

The door to the kitchen opened, and Anika returned with more eggs. She carried them in her apron like a basket and gently rolled them onto the table. “Elam,” she said. “You look filthy. There’s a tub behind the house filled with water. When you’re done, I want you to go clean yourself. I’m guessing you’re old enough to bathe yourself?”

Elam’s face flushed. “I’ve got it.”

Anika looked in his bowl, which was now empty. “Looks like you’re done. So go.”

Elam glanced at Furey, then back at Anika, and slowly rose from the chair. “Alright.”

“Go. And stay close to the house.”

Anika held open the door for him. He took a look back to Furey, who nodded toward the door, then stepped outside.

He shielded his eyes as he stepped onto the grass and heard the door shut behind him. As his eyes slowly adjusted to the light, he saw the mountains in the distance. He knew they were miles away, but their immense size made them seem much closer. He stared at them for a while, realizing he had never taken the time to gaze upon them. Their snowcapped peaks rose above the distant clouds, as though the white peaks belonged to the clouds themselves and not to the bases below. He traced their outlines with his finger, like a child tracing the outlines of pictures in a picture book. He stood there for a while then walked to the back of the house.

Fields, dotted by the occasional farm, stretched for miles behind Furey's house. A haze lingered far off in the distance: the Valley of Nights. Elam stared at the vastness before him, awed by the natural spectacle he had never seen before.

Directly behind Furey's house, there stood a chicken coup and pen. A dozen chickens clucked and pecked at the soil, and a rooster proudly strutted in their midst. Elam looked around and saw a wooden tub sitting in the sun. A towel and bar of soap sat on its edge. He looked around. There were no windows at the rear of the house, and the nearest dwelling beside Furey's seemed to be at least a quarter mile away. He drew a deep breath and pulled off his shirt, unbuckled his belt, and slipped off his pants. His fingers touched the water. It was cool, refreshing. He stepped into the water and slowly sat down.

The water rushed against his skin and sent chills up his spine. Taking a deep breath, he plunged his head below the surface. His eyes opened, and he stared at the sunlight's distorted rays above him. He stayed there until he could no longer hold his breath. He came to the surface, breathed deeply, and plunged back under. His fingers wrapped around the bar of soap, and he scrubbed himself until the water was bubbly and brown from dirt. He scooped up a handful of bubbles, blew on them, and watched them scatter. He laughed and dove under again.

He continued this until he grew tired and cold. After wrapping himself in the towel, he lay in the grass and stared at the sky. The clouds were so white and fluffy, like huge clumps of lambs' wool. He stared at the sun until his eyes burned, then he rubbed them and did it again. He had never paused to look at the daytime sky. The sight exhilarated him.

After his skin was thoroughly warmed by the sun, he dressed himself. He picked up his knife to slip it into his belt but changed his mind, grabbed a fistful of his hair, carefully cut it so it no longer went past his ears, and spent the next few minutes doing so to the rest. He ran his

fingers through it, making sure he hadn't missed any strands, and then looked at his murky reflection in the tub. Only once he felt satisfied did he return to the kitchen.

When he reached the door, he heard a voice that made him pause. It was a man's voice, not Furey's, and he pressed his ear against the door to listen. He heard Anika laugh and Furey say something he couldn't understand. Then the stranger's voice spoke again. He gripped the handle of his knife and continued to listen. Neither Anika nor Furey sounded distraught, so he waited to enter until the stranger left.

He sat in the grass and let the sun soak into his skin until he heard the sound of creaking floorboards and the front door opening. He scrambled to his feet, moved along the side of the house, and peeked around the corner.

The stranger was the first to leave the house. He was a tall man with auburn hair who looked around Furey's age.

"So you'll go to him?" the man asked.

"We will," said Anika. "Thank you for the recommendation."

Elam watched as the man gave Anika a hug that seemed to last too long and then shook Furey's hand.

"I'll see you both soon," the man said as he descended the steps.

"Thank you, Asher," Anika said, waving goodbye.

Elam watched as Asher began walking away from the house. He heard the front door close and was about to go back inside when Asher turned back and looked in Elam's direction. Elam ducked behind the corner. Slowly, he peeked out again so see that Asher had continued toward the city. He went inside.

"Elam," Furey said. "You look different!"

Anika looked him up and down. "You look presentable now. And you cut your hair! Furey, I wish you'd cut yours!"

Furey ran a finger through his hair that almost reached his shoulders. "I don't think so."

Anika huffed.

"Who was that?" Elam asked.

"That was Asher," Furey said. A sour note laced his tone. "He's an old friend of ours."

"What'd he want?"

"He just came by to say hello," Anika said. "He recommended a physician."

Furey made a flame dance in his palm and held it to his shoulder. "I don't want to go."

"You need to go!"

"They're all crooks, Anika! They just cut you open, say you're healed, and take your money."

Elam laughed but soon bit his lip upon seeing the sincerity in Furey's eyes. "I'm sure they're not all like that."

"Whether they are or not, we're going," Anika declared.

"When are you going?" Elam asked.

"Never," Furey said.

"Now," said Anika.

"Can I go with you?"

Both Furey and Anika stared at Elam.

"Why?" Furey asked after a moment of silent surprise.

"I need to see someone."

"Who?"

“An old friend.”

“You have friends?”

“Of course I do!”

“Elam,” Furey said, “going into the city is—”

“Look, my hair is shorter and I look ‘presentable.’ No one recognized me yesterday! It’ll be quick. I promise.”

Furey glanced at Anika, who shrugged.

“Fine,” Anika said. “We’ll go to the physician, you go to this friend of yours.”

Furey added, “We really don’t need to—”

“We’re going.”

An Unexpected Visitor

The day grew hot, especially amid the crowded streets of Ember. Elam had followed Furey and Anika into the marketplace then separated from them only after promising that he would later return to their house to reassure them that he was safe. Yet instead of immediately venturing to his destination, he found every distraction he could to try to change his mind. He zigzagged through alleyways, circled the marketplace a half dozen times, and wandered the streets until he thought he was lost. For one moment, he thought that he had succeeded in getting lost. It was only then that he saw the name of the street—*Zauber*—engraved in the façade of a building that he realized he had wandered to the place he had wanted to avoid.

Elegant row homes lined the street, and candlelight from their windows made shadows dance on their exteriors. Elam's heart raced as he read the house numbers, and he stopped outside the house marked with the number six. As he stared at the house, his head filled with incomprehensible whispers that were not of his imagination. He whirled around, expecting to find someone whispering in his ear, but he was alone. When he turned back to the house, he saw a translucent, silvery figure standing between him and the doorway. It looked like a shield, one so large that it reached from the street to the rooftop. Elam felt dizzy, wanted to turn back and run, but he couldn't stop himself from approaching the house. The closer he got to the figure, the louder the voices became. He looked up at the looming shield and stepped through it. It felt like walking through a spider's web. When he looked behind him, the shield was gone.

He followed the short walk to the front door and let himself in. He needn't knock before entering. This man didn't deserve to know if someone entered his home and private life. It hadn't seemed to bother him when he had interfered in Elam's.

Elam searched the bottom floor and was pleased to find it deserted. *He must be alone.* The spinning sensation in his head changed from fear to rage as he eyed the plush carpeting, leather bound chairs, and intricate wall carvings throughout the house. He was about to leave the sitting room when he noticed a small drawstring sack on a bookshelf. He opened it, saw gold coins inside, stuffed the coins into the pocket of his pants, and placed the empty sack back on the bookshelf.

He climbed the staircase and crept to a room from which firelight spilled into the hallway. He looked inside. It was a grand room with wooden bookshelves built into two of its walls. An elegant green carpet with gold tassels covered most of the wooden floor, and a massive desk and chair sat by the farthest wall. A fire blazed in a hearth behind the desk. Elam leaned against the doorpost and stared at the man sitting at the desk with his nose in a book. Elam cleared his throat, and the man's head jerked up from the massive volume. He appeared older than Elam remembered; his once dark brown hair was turning gray with wisps of white encircling his ears. His face was more wrinkled and tired than it had been two years ago. He was growing old, and that was a good thing. Old age meant death, and Elam would not have cared if the man dropped that very moment.

"Hello, Daedalus," Elam said as the man put on his glasses.

The man stared at Elam for a moment then forced a small grin although all the color in his face had drained. "Elam," he greeted weakly. "I didn't recognize you!"

Elam didn't return the smile but stepped into the room. "I didn't expect you to recognize me, but you seemed to in the tavern yesterday. I hardly recognized myself when I saw my reflection in a mirror. Do you know what it's like not to recognize yourself? My guess is you wouldn't."

Daedalus looked at Elam but didn't say a word.

"What? Seeing how torn apart I look?" Elam moved closer to the desk. "Well take a look. I should have stayed in my old clothes to show you what I truly looked like." He watched Daedalus take a handkerchief from his drawer and dab his sweating head. "Nervous?"

Daedalus took a deep breath, wiped his face once more, and sat up straighter in his chair. "Well, boy, you haven't changed in the least. You may look different—that you certainly do—but you are still the same. No doubt is in that."

Elam's fingers twitched at the handle of his knife. 'Boy.' That was what Afieus and his men called him, as if were without a name. "Maybe it's a good thing that I haven't changed much. Your stupidity has only changed the way I look, not act."

Daedalus leapt from his chair and slammed the book shut. "My stupidity?"

"You heard me! All of it's your fault! Everything!" He watched Daedalus storm toward him, but he remained steadfast with rage. He reached for his left arm and pulled back his sleeve, revealing three deep scars. "See these?"

Daedalus hesitated, averting his eyes.

"Look at me!" Elam shouted. "They're because of what you did!" Daedalus grabbed his wrists with a surprisingly strong grip, but he didn't fight back. "What do you think you're going to do that I haven't felt before? Go to hell!"

"Trust me, I'm already there."

"Let me go!"

"You know perfectly well that this is not my fault. If weren't for my actions, you'd be dead! Don't you dare deny it!"

Elam's voice bordered on hysteria as he laughed, "You think this is living? I'm already dead!"

"Listen, you ungrateful rat. It's not my fault that Afieus wants to kill you, and you know that as well as I. If you need someone to blame for these two years, blame Selene! She gave her life to save yours, and this is how you repay her?"

Elam gave one last thrust with his arms and freed himself. "Don't speak of my mother! You don't deserve to say her name!" He drew his knife from his belt and pointed it at Daedalus.

Daedalus stared at the knife, then at Elam, and threw his hands in the air in surrender. "Alright, Elam! If merely saying your mother's name will cost me my life or a limb, then I shall refrain from doing so. A parting word of advice; if you think pulling out your knife will cause you to win every battle, you'll be dead the next time Afieus or Darien sees you. They're not creaky old men like me." He sat back in his chair, reopened the cover of his book, and resumed reading.

"What makes you think we're done here? I could kill you right now!"

"But you won't."

"Don't test me."

Daedalus said nothing.

"Look at me!"

Elam was given no response. He roughly pushed his knife back through his belt. Daedalus was reading as if Elam had gone. Elam slammed his fist against the wall and turned back to see if Daedalus wondered what happened. There was no response.

Slowly, Elam slipped down the wall onto the floor and cradled his head on his knees. He pulled back his sleeve and again looked at the scars on his arm. What had he done to deserve

them? He'd attacked Darien, but the Shadow had only suffered one scar, not three. He remembered writhing on the ground, screaming, Afieus laughing.

"You know," said Daedalus, not lifting his head from his book, "I have come to realize something very important about life. If I dwell on my past too long, it becomes a permanent part of me and I can never escape it. But, if I accept my past, knowing it cannot be changed, my future is much better." He glanced at Elam. "Roll down the sleeve, Elam. Yes, the past is painful, and yes, you have had a cruel one, but dwelling on it and feeling pity for yourself will not make those scars go away." He forced a small smile of encouragement when Elam looked up at him, but Elam quickly lowered his gaze.

"I can't accept it. And if moving on requires me forgetting any of it, then I might as well die right now."

"I didn't say anything about forgetting," Daedalus noted, leaning back in his chair, "but if you want even the slightest chance at life, you need to stop feeling pity for yourself." He looked at Elam's rolled sleeve. "Put it down."

Elam gripped at the material. "I won't put it down! I want to rub it in their faces and show them how much pain they caused me!" He rose to his feet. "I want them to regret what they did to me! I want them to be sorry! I...I..." He looked at the old man to see that he was once again ignoring him. "Are you deaf?"

Daedalus paid no attention.

Elam slouched on the floor and again rested his head on his knees. He didn't look at Daedalus. Instead, he looked at the bookcases. They rose all the way to the ceiling and were stacked with old manuscripts, statues, and numerous trinkets. He felt a warm wave of composure rush through him as he stared at the multiple volumes lining the shelves. He stood and scanned

through them. Every book he took off the shelf was bound in rich leather decorated with expensive jewels, fine lettering, and pictures—pictures of happy smiling people, of dancing fairies and nymphs. There had to be one, just one book, that did not have a smile upon its cover or at least one miniscule picture that did not have someone dancing. One of the books had to contain sorrow. Life wasn't all joy.

Elam continued searching until he found a cover with no fairies, no nymphs, no smiles, and no dancing. He took it off the shelf and turned it over in his hand. Only one lone star and a crescent moon decorated its dark cover. "What's this one about?"

Daedalus finally looked at him. "Oh, that is my favorite book, one of the oldest masterpieces in the world. It was handwritten by the author himself. Notice those jewels on the star." He walked over to Elam and took the book from him. "Flawless alexandrite!" He admired the cover as if it were a lost treasure. "Yes, this is the greatest book I own."

"But what's it about? Is it a sad story?"

"Sad? Why yes, it is very sad. It's the tale two young lovers. The lady is from the rival family of the young man, so a war breaks out. The lad is killed by his brother while attempting to protect—"

"So, that's how it ends, right?" Finally, a story that seemed plausible.

"Oh, no," Daedalus reassured, quite unaware of Elam's optimism for a tragedy. "The young lady dies shortly after from heartache—"

"That sounds sad."

"—but she meets her true love in the Land of Afterlife and marries him there. A timeless and beautiful ending!"

Disgusted, Elam snatched the book and returned it to the shelf with the others. Every story, every poem he had ever heard, all had happy endings. Not one author was brave enough to write an ending in which everyone was not married or reincarnated. Maybe everyone was not destined for a joyful ending, had the authors thought of that?

As much as Elam was dismayed by happy endings, he envied them. He stared at the bindings and desperately wanted to sink into one of the books, into another world. Were there really places where a peaceful ending awaited everyone? Even in death? He ached for such a promise. When he did die, whenever that would happen, would there be a lovely place awaiting him...or would he only be in darkness?

His heart began to race again; the thought of death always made it skip and pound at his breast. What would it feel like when his heart did stop beating? *Shut up*. Would it hurt? *No... It wouldn't...* Would all the pain he had ever experienced come flooding back in one final torrent? *SHUT UP!* Would anyone miss him? *Please stop!*

“Elam?”

What would Daedalus think? *Stop! He doesn't matter—*

“Elam!”

Who would kill him? *Shut up!* Would they make it painful? *STOP!*

Torturous? *No, no they wouldn't! Stop! You can stop! PLEASE!*

“Elam! Elam, it's alright!” Daedalus tried moving the boy's limp arms. “Elam, wake up!” He shook him. “Elam!”

Elam bolted up and, in doing so, knocked Daedalus backwards. He didn't recall fainting. He reached his hand to his face, which was soaking with sweat and tears, as he struggled to catch

his breath. His head spun as he tried to remember where he was, and he gasped in shock when he saw Daedalus eying him with a look of horror. “Not you!”

“Calm down,” Daedalus said, keeping his voice as composed as possible. “I’m not going to hurt you, Elam. Believe me!” He looked around then placed the volume with the star and crescent moon on the cover in Elam’s hands. “Do you remember this?”

Elam stared at the book, and in a surge of memories, everything came flooding back to him. He tried to slow his breathing, taking deep, choking breaths. There was no danger; there were only memories. He was safe. He wasn’t dead, but he felt as much.

He couldn’t keep himself from crying. He cried so violently that his head throbbed. “Help me!” he begged, clinging to Daedalus’ shirt. “Please, please help me!”

“Elam...I can’t...”

“Do something! Anything! End what you started! I can’t do this! I can’t kill him! Don’t make me be like him!”

Daedalus stared at him. What had he done? *It’s not your fault. You can’t do anything. It’s in the past.* “Elam...” He couldn’t go on. The boy’s desperation pierced his spirit like a dagger. He wanted to say, “We did it to help you,” but all he could utter was, “I can’t.”

Elam’s face drained of all color. Breathing felt like sucking air through a straw, and only one thought entered his mind, as he grew more and more lightheaded:

There was no way to escape Afieus. No possible way.